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Oxford·Jewish

CONGREGATION

**A guide to the OJC's
Artefacts & Vestments exhibition
to mark the Congregation's 175th anniversary**

15th – 28th February, 2018

We hope you enjoy this exhibition but we would request you do not take this booklet with you.

If you would like a soft copy, please contact igarson1@gmail.com and he will email it out to you.

**We are grateful to Wolfson College
for the loan of the display cases
in the Wilfred Faust Hall.**

1. The Holy Ark

The **ארון הקדש** (*Aron haKodesh*), where the Torah Scrolls are kept, is situated in the front of the synagogue and always on the wall to allow for prayer in the direction of the city of Jerusalem where the Holy Temple once stood. The Ark is the holiest place in the synagogue.

The Ark is opened only during special prayers and when removing the Torah to read during prayer services. It is customary to stand when the Ark is opened.

Since it houses sacred items, the Ark itself is considered holy.

This Ark was completed in November 2017 and replaced the one built in 1974. The 4 front panels and the 2 side panels are solid English Walnut which allowed for the graphic design to be inserted.

2. The Ark's graphic design

The pattern on the Ark is a truly unique set of sound recordings. Based on two familiar chants of our services, it was created by Professor Jim Woodhouse of Cambridge University's Faculty of Engineering.

These two chants are:

.... **ויאמר משה**... *"Whenever the Ark set out, Moses would say...."* (Numbers 8:1) and

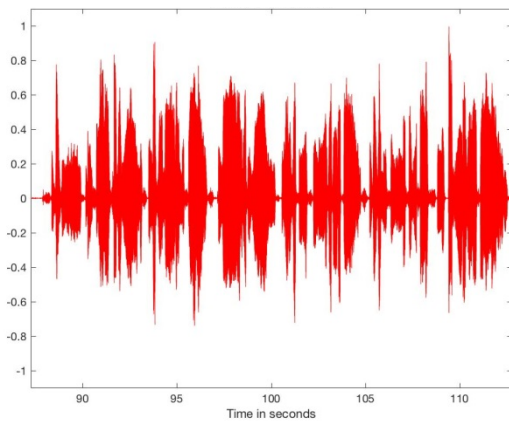
חדש ימינו כקדם, חדש ימינו כקדם *"Renew our days as of old"* x2 (Proverbs 3:18)

The first is sung when opening the Ark and the second when closing it. Brass copies of these phrases have been inserted on the sides of the Ark

The RAW, recorded visual representation of a 25-second segment of the five words **חדש ימינו כקדם, חדש ימינו כקדם** is shown overleaf but it does not make for a good design for engraving on the Ark. A more

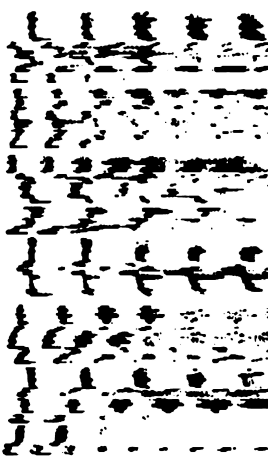
appealing design came from using a visual representation of sound called a *spectrogram* – or *sonogram*.

Extract of the Ark closing prayer (the 2 doors)



The sound sample was turned into short chunks and a *frequency spectrum* produced computationally for each. Described in terms of a musical pitch (i.e. a frequency) that varies in time to make up the tune, it mirrors the way our own hearing system works.

In the spectrogram below, time runs vertically upwards from the bottom. Frequency runs along the horizontal axis.



Up the left hand side, you can see a wiggly, fragmented line. This maps out the musical score of the singer's voice: the line moves to the right when the pitch rises and to the left when it falls. The series of lines that are more or less parallel to this left-most line are the harmonics of the voice.

With the help of computer software, the design produced here was routed into the wood by Robin Furlong, the cabinetmaker.

3. The Eternal Light

The **נר תמיד** (*Ner Tamid*) lamp burns continuously in every synagogue and is positioned above or near the Ark. It represents the Menorah (the 7-branch candelabra) of the Temple in Jerusalem. The continuous burning also symbolizes God's eternal presence and is therefore, never extinguished.

Our Ner Tamid is made of brass and was part of the original construction of the synagogue in 1974. A second Ner Tamid was installed in the Wilfred Faust Hall (WFH) in 2005.

4. The Scrolls

The new Ark houses 7 of our Torah scrolls (**ספרי תורה**) whilst a further 2 scrolls can be found in the WFH. These scrolls are all hand-written in the original Hebrew and contain the 5 Books of Moses, from Genesis to Deuteronomy. It is rolled up around two ornate wooden shafts and attached to either end of the scroll called the **עצי חיים** (*Transl. A'tsei Chayim*) or the Trees of Life.

The Torah scroll is routinely read aloud in all synagogues on Shabbat mornings, on Jewish festivals, on the first day(s) of a new lunar month and on fast days.

Our holiest and most precious treasure, the Torah is considered the heart, mind and soul of Judaism.

According to Scripture, the first Torah scroll in history was dictated by God verbatim and written by Moses, just before his passing.

From that original Torah scroll, many identical copies have been hand-written by pious scribes (**סופרים** - Soferim) in all subsequent generations. Today there are many hundreds of thousands of Torah scrolls in existence.

Our own scrolls come from various parts of the world including Canterbury, Prague, Swansea and Jerusalem.

5. The Curtain

In addition to its doors, the Ark is often closed off by an ornate curtain called a **פרכת** (*Parochet*). It is reminiscent of the curtain that shielded the Golden Ark that was in the Holy Temple.

These curtains are often decorated with words from the Scriptures or the sages that reflect the sanctity of the Torah scrolls housed therein.

Above the Ark you can see the inscription **דע לפני מי אתה עומד** which means "*Be aware before whom you stand.*" This was part of the Oxford Synagogue's original design in 1974.

Above that, and also part of the original 1974 design, there is a modern representation of the Decalogue, two Tablets that bore the Ten Commandments.

6. The Torah's external decorations

- a. **מעיל (Meil) Mantle:** the dressing of the Torah scroll represents honour and reverence to God and His commandments. The Torah mantle is an ornate covering that both protects and beautifies the Sefer Torah. Whilst in many parts of the world, scrolls are housed in cylindrically-shaped boxes. Here, they are typically made of velvet and embroidered with metallic thread, silk and ornamental beads. These mantles are opened at the bottom and pierced with two openings on the top so that the A'tsei Chayim (see 4. above) can protrude. Mantles may come in different colours but during festivals these are all changed to white to symbolise the purity and holiness of these days.
- b. **רמונים (Rimonim) Bells:** as shown in the Ark, these silver bells decorate the top of the dressed scrolls. During Temple times, these ornaments were worn on the hem of the High Priest's robe to alert people of his approach.
- c. **אפוד (Efod) Breastplate:** According to the Book of Exodus, the sacred priestly breastplate was worn by the High Priest of the Israelites. Our breastplates are all made in silver.

- d. **יָד** (*Yad*) Pointer: A Yad (literally a hand) is a Jewish Torah pointer, used by the reader to follow the text during the Torah reading from the parchment Torah scrolls.

7. The Bimah

The Hebrew word **בִּימָה** bimah means “platform” and refers to the platform in the centre of the synagogue from where the Torah is read. It also refers to the reading table from where services are led.

This Bimah is part of the synagogue’s redesign of 2017. To complement the Ark’s darker walnut colour, the Bimah finish is in European oak.

8. The Omer Counter

In the book of Leviticus (Ch. 23: v15-16), we are commanded to count seven weeks from the time that the Omer - the new barley offering - was brought in the Temple. That date corresponds to the 16th day of the month of Nissan and the 2nd day of Passover.

We begin our count on the second night of Passover and continue until Pentecost (Shavuot/Feast of Weeks). By then we have actually counted 49 days.

9. The Readings Board

This Readings board has no religious purpose and is a take-off of hymn boards common in churches. It serves to inform the congregation what is being read on any particular day.

.... CONTINUE INTO ENTRANCE LOBBY

10. Mezuzot

As you walk back into the entrance lobby you will notice the Mezuzot on the right hand doorposts. A Mezuzah is affixed to the doorpost of Jewish homes to fulfil the biblical commandment in Deuteronomy 6:9 to "*write the words of God on the gates and doorposts of your house*". The casing is inconsequential: it is the tiny hand-written parchment inside that contains the Shemah – the most important prayer in Judaism – that gives it its importance.

11. The Tree of Life

This artefact is being progressively populated by leaves marking celebratory events. It has no religious significance. The **Tree of Life** (Hebrew: **עץ החיים**, (*Etz haChayim*)), is a term used in the Bible in Genesis and a number of times in both Proverbs and Revelation.

12a. & 12b. OJC books

These 2 books were published in late 1980's and early 1990 respectively but two long-standing members of the OJC. The Jews of Oxford by Professor David Lewis is still given to boys and girls on the occasion of their barmitsvah or batmitsvah. Should you be interested in purchasing a copy, please contact the Administrator.

13. The Chanukkiyah

The Menorah that was in the Temple had 7 branches. This large candelabrum has 9 branches so it was made to be used over the festival of Chanukkah.

14. The brass plaque

This plaque was originally in the old synagogue up to 1974 and was a memorial to all Jews who had fallen during the 1st World War (1914-1918). It was then put aside and eventually rededicated in 1983 as a shared memorial to the fallen of the 2nd World War and to those who perished in the Holocaust.

15. The Embroidery

The Oxford Community Embroidery was a commission that commemorates 150 years of contemporary Jewish life in Oxford between the years 1842 and 1992.

Thirty six members of the Oxford community took four years to embroider the piece, sewing a total of 64 x 8" squares and 4 x 16" squares on canvas of gauge 10:1. A total of 512,000 stitches were worked in 31 different colours.

The embroidery was unveiled on the 13th September, 1998 by Dr Evan Harris MP

..... CONTINUE INTO THE WFH

16. The Ark in the Wilfred Faust Hall

The Ark that has found a new home in the WFH has parts that date from different periods. The original old doors are from around 1740 and made of English wainscot oak. The carvings are probably c. 1880 and of English oak. The Eastern European carvings were probably made by an immigrant carver from the area of Bohemia which stretched from Poland down to

what is now the Czech Republic. The carvings were most probably designed for and fitted to the original Ark but failed to completely cover the new design.

The main carcass was refurbished and expanded by 'I Joel'. It is signed by him and dated 16 July 1945.

Up to 1973, this Ark was used in the old synagogue which stood on this very site and is shown in the 2 paintings on display here (See 19a. & b. below). When it was brought into use in 1974 as a reserve Ark, it was painted in black matt paint hiding some beautiful carvings.

The Ark was restored in the summer of 2003. When the black paint was stripped off, the carvings had traces of different coloured paints which were sympathetically replaced.

17. The Ner Tamid

The Eternal Light in this second synagogue was designed and made by the artist Sara Naftaly who drew inspiration from the symbol of the burning bush. Please refer to the artist's letter and designs on the right of the Ark.

18. The Decalogue

This Decalogue board was part of the old synagogue's furniture/accoutrements until 1974 when it was replaced by the current building. We do not have any records of who made or how it made its way into the synagogue.

19a. & 19b. Two paintings

The 2 paintings on display here depict the old synagogue. Both Zena Posner's oil and Thea Doniach's watercolour show the old synagogue that stood on this very site until it was replaced in 1974 with the present

building. In the two depictions, we can see the Ark and the Decalogue board on display in this room today.

20. Old Synagogue

Below 19b. is a photograph that shows the old synagogue that stood on this site between 1893 and 1973.

21. The Canterbury Indenture

Drafted in 1931 at the time the Canterbury Jewish Community was no longer viable, this indenture was signed by various worthies from both communities. The top half will have been retained in Canterbury. Although this indenture refers to Torah scrolls, other items will have been transferred as 2 pointers on display elsewhere here are engraved with a Canterbury origin.

22. The wooden plaque

This hand-carved plaque was presented in 1945 as a gift of the Jewish personnel of the United States Army. The carving speaks for itself. It normally hangs in The Silver Hall.

23. Wooden block candleholder

This candleholder commemorates the Holocaust of 1939-1945. It was commissioned in 2016 and will be used at future Holocaust Memorial events organised by the Oxford branch of the Council of Christian and Jews. It holds 11 candle cups: 6 to represent the 6 million Jews who perished under Nazi oppression. The remaining 5 cups represent a further estimated 5 million - including Jehovah's Witnesses, political opponents, homosexuals and Roma - who perished either for their ethnic background or for political reasons.

It will be used once again at the planned commemoration at the OJC on the evening of Yom Hashoah (Holocaust Memorial Day) 11th April, 2018.

24. The old bells

Little is known of these bells that have never been used at least in the last 40 years. The style is either Polish or Lithuanian. The base of the set of bells at the front has, what appears to be, a memorial inscription in Hungarian. They may have arrived in the OJC with the donation of 2 scrolls from Czechoslovakia in the 1970s but we cannot be sure about that.

25. Kiddush cups

קדוש – Kiddush, the sanctification of wine, takes place in synagogue twice on the Shabbat and on each of the 3 main festivals – Pesach (Passover), Shavuot (Pentecost) and Sukkot (Tabernacles).

26. The Shofar

שופר - This horn is an ancient musical instrument typically made of a ram's horn, used for Jewish religious purposes. It is blown during the month of Elul - the Jewish month preceding Rosh Hashanah (the Jewish New Year) - during Rosh Hashanah services and at the end of Yom Kippur to signal the end of the fast. Like the modern bugle, the shofar lacks pitch-altering devices and all pitch control is done by varying the adjustment of the player's lips and tongue to the mouthpiece.

27. The Alexandrian scroll

This scroll was found in a roll of 32 unstitched parchment sections in a plastic bag in the back of a cupboard in the synagogue in March 1996. It was subsequently discovered that this scroll was part of a larger collection

brought back from Egypt by Lord (Sam) Segal around 1980 or 1981 with the permission of President Anwar Sadat.

Although it has not been possible to date it precisely, it is estimated to be more than 200 years old.

According to scholars who have examined this scroll, it is written in a style reminiscent of the Rambam Yeshiva* of Alexandria, Egypt. The scroll was taken to Israel in January 1998 where letters were rewritten in places and stitched back together.

With various contributions from OJC members for the Atsei Chayim, bells and mantles, a special service was organised in June 1998 to bring the renewed scroll back into use.

* A yeshivah is a house of Jewish study

28. Lord Segal & the Egyptian scrolls

This photograph shows Sam (Lord) Segal surrounded by some of the Torah scrolls he managed to bring out of Egypt in the 1980s. During his lifetime, Lord Segal was a key member of the OJC.

29. The Meguillah

מגילה - The Meguillah is a handwritten scroll that tells the story of Esther. It is read during the festival of Purim.

30. The School Visits' scroll

This scroll contains all the 5 Books of Moses but is not kosher and as such, it is not used in religious services. No known origin.

31. The community's breastplates

We have already referred to breastplates in 6c. above. These are 3 of the breastplates owned by the OJC. Over the last 20 years or so, they have been used very infrequently to avoid damage to our mantles' embroidery. The smaller one on display here was a gift to the community at the time the Alexandrian scroll was brought back into use after being repaired. It is used on several occasions across the year

32. The community's pointers

We have already referred to Yads (pointers) in 6d. above. The OJC owns 10 standard-sized silver pointers and 3 smaller ones. Each of the 5 pointers exhibited here tells its own story.

- a. This beautiful but fragile filigree artefact has been accidentally broken on 4 separate occasions. It has been repaired each time and is now used infrequently to avoid further damage.
- b. This Yad was a gift to the community to celebrate 2 members' respective 60th birthdays in 2003.
- c. The 3rd Yad, in Russian silver, was purchased from a market stall in Ottawa, Canada and gifted by a non-member to the Oxford synagogue. At the top end of this Yad, you will see some cloves. These cloves would have been stored in the flip-open cavity. When the Yad was hung over a scroll inside the Ark it would keep the Ark smelling fresh.
- d. The Indenture on the long wall (See 21. above) refers to the transfer of scrolls from Canterbury to Oxford. This Yad and a second, very similar one, arrived with those scrolls. Both these Yads are inscribed as having been "Deposited at Oxford from Canterbury" in 1931.
- e. This Yad was found in the centre of the Alexandrian scroll (See 27. above) which was discovered in 32 unstitched sections in 1996. The inscription is a memorial to Kachla Atiyah which probably confirms its origins as Egyptian.

33. The entrance door

The main entrance doors to the Centre were designed in 1973 by the Czech-born sculptor, Naomi Blake. The inscription is Psalm 84:2-4:

מה ידירות משכנותיך ה' צבאות

How beautiful are Your tabernacles, O Lord of hosts.

נכספה וגם כלתה נפשי לחצרות ה'

My soul yearns, yea, even pines for the courts of the Lord.

לבי ובשרי ירננו אל אלהי:

My heart and my flesh sing for joy unto the living God.

גם צפור מצאה בית ודרור קן לה

Yea, the sparrow has found a house, and the swallow a nest for herself.

The letters go round unexpected corners which, whilst a bit of a challenge to follow the words, it is still possible to do so.

Following this exhibition we will be updating the booklet identifying donations, attributions and memorials related to many of the items on display here. This can be found on the Watson Notices Table in the foyer.

This exhibition was curated by the Artefacts & Vestments Committee which is made up of:

Isaac Garson, Judy Silver and Lynne Ward

Whilst we have tried our best to provide as much information as we had to hand about the selected exhibits, we would welcome any additional information you might be able to share about any of them.

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Oxford Jewish Congregation
21 Richmond Road, Oxford OX1 2JL
www.ojc-online.org