

## **The Jews in Gloucestershire; Sunday 29th March 2009. Presentation to Cheltenham Hebrew Congregation Festival of Jewish Culture, Prince Michael Hall, Dean Close School.**

---

by Brian Edward Torode (copyright Cheltenham Local History Society)

---

My initial interest began 1987 when I learned that the Synagogue was about to celebrate its 150th anniversary of consecration in 1989. I saw this as a wonderful opportunity to record Cheltenham's nineteenth century Jewish history which up to that time had only been summarily researched. As far as I was aware there were no unsung heroes to be acclaimed, no great builders or speculators to be honoured, but there was a wealth of information to be uncovered about some of the ordinary folk who settled in Cheltenham in its heyday and contributed through their distinctive faith and culture, to the development and daily life of the town, and to the establishment of their own identity within it.

Sources tapped were those available to any local historian, some in the Synagogue held archives, some in the local Record Office, some in London at the Board of Deputies and some in local newspapers of the time. I must at this stage congratulate the local synagogue officers on the way they have conserved and preserved their archives and thank them for making them so readily available to me. Mention must also be made of the wonderfully informative and well maintained Burial Ground records and headstones.

There is ample evidence for the existence of Jews in medieval Gloucester, but post Elizabethan evidence for the existence of Jews in Gloucestershire is frugal to say the least. In 1712 Sir Robert Atkyns expressed the opinion that there were no Jews living in Gloucestershire but that a Jewess was residing in Tewkesbury. The Parish registers of Oxenton, near Tewkesbury, recorded the death in 1685 of a Jew of Tewkesbury – perhaps the above woman's deceased husband and Moses Myers of Cheltenham, pedlar, is mentioned in the London Gazette of 1749. However, for the real beginnings of a Jewish Community we must look to Gloucester. There in a Court case of 26th March 1764, a Jew was called to give evidence for the prosecution, the report adding that "A colony of the Sons of Israel has lately taken up abode here.'

In 1775 and 1776 the London Gazette names Isaiah Abraham Zachariah, silversmith, of Gloucester, and Sampson Levy also of Gloucester. A later obituary records the death in 1821 of Isaiah Abraham whose family had lived in the town since 1686. He himself had lived in the same house in Southgate Street since 1765. He was a dealer, travelling jeweller and money lender- a thriving business in a busy port such as Gloucester. He was also Minister of the Gloucester Synagogue and baked the Passover Matza. A Festival calendar compiled by his father is in the Gloucester Archive. Isaiah's daughter Amelia was the last of the Jewish

Community to survive and died in 1886 aged 95 years. She was buried in the St Michael's School Burial Ground.

It was Isaiah who claimed that when Quakers came into a town at one end, the Jews left at the other, hence the demise of the Gloucester Community.

Gloucester Synagogue had certainly been established at the end of Eastgate Street by 1792, although by 1802 it had moved to premises nearer the Docks. It was advertised as holding services as late as 1847. A Burial Ground also existed with the earliest recorded burial date of 1794. The Ground had been purchased from St Michael's Church served members as far afield as Stroud, Ross on Wye, Hereford as well as Gloucester. The Jewish Chronicle 6th August 1926 contains a list of the known burials but the site was closed in 1938 and the bodies re-interred at the Municipal Cemetery at Coney Hill outside the city boundary. The site was then donated by the Jewish Trustees – to be used as playground for the children of Gloucester.

The decline in the number of Jewish residents in the city during the early part of the nineteenth century may well have been the impetus for the Cheltenham residents to consider the establishment of a recognised community, with its own place of worship in the town. Certainly advertisements were appearing in the local press of the period for services offered by travelling salesmen, opticians, dentists, corncutters and teachers of the Hebrew Language from as early as 1815. These advertisements give us a wealth of information about the person concerned and also about his travels, place of residence and national clientel, amongst whom are named the Duke of Wellington, King George IV, William IV, Queen Adelaide and Queen Victoria.



Cheltenham Synagogue

Once numbers were seen to be stabilising, consideration was given to the provision of a Burial Ground in 1824, at a time when the small resident and passing congregation worshipped in hired premises near to today's Public Library. The purchase of land for a Burial round certainly indicated the intention of the congregation to settle permanently in the town. The first burial according to the Cheltenham Journal of 23rd March 1829 was that of a Mr Wolf aged 73- 'This is the first Jew ever to be buried in the Jewish Burial Ground in Cheltenham'.

Today the Burial Ground is an oasis of calm and an invaluable source of information for local and family historians. Most of the stones are in excellent condition, unlike those at Gloucester, and all have been recorded by a Local History Society Member. Some contain descriptive details about the deceased's death and as in the following example one can imagine the family's distress:

Sacred to the memory of Walter Emmanuel, 5th son of Joseph and Rebecca Levason of Hereford who was drowned accidentally in the River Wye on 17th January 1872 aged 9. Also of John David, sixth son of the above, who died March 25th 1849 aged five weeks, and Horatio Jones seventh son of the above who died December 21st 1850 aged five months. The Lord gave and the Lord taketh away. Blessed be the name of the Lord.

Many stones carry personal details and refer to the deceased's ancestry, travels, places of residence and employment – all in Hebrew, with a potted English version.

Marriage Registers exist from the opening of the Synagogue in 1839 although the first recorded marriage was that of Benjamin Isaacs and Sarah Bella Levason on 8th December 1841. The registers contain many names, giving details of parents, occupations and residences – Sternberg, Goldberg, Alex, Davis, Solomons, Abraham, Jacobs, Moses, and Nathan to name but a few. It is easy to relate these to the many press reports in which members of the Community are named both in good and bad light:

Chelt Chronicle 15.09.1837: The premises of Mr Alex and Mr Moses are described in an account of Cheltenham's decorations for the coronation of the new Queen.

Chelt Chronicle, 3,10,1844- a triumphalist account of the baptism in the Parish Church of a converted Jewess, the first in the town, by the name of Ada Wolfsberg of Kracow.

Chelt Journal of 12.7.1831- a long report of an appeal to assist three ladies of the Jewish persuasion from Gloucester who have been reduced to penury through the treachery of a false friend. A lengthy list of subscribers – mostly local Jews is given.

Chelt Mercury 13 9 1862 – a full report of litigation between Moses Marks and Michael Myers. Both plaintiff and defendant were members of the Jewish persuasion and formerly in partnership.

Cheltenham Mercury 2.8 1873- the notice of the death of a former Jewish Minister in Cheltenham, Rev Isaac Pulver, in Tasmania. This gave many personal and career details.

Perhaps the most entertaining accounts are to be found in the advertisement of Mr Moseley, boot and shoe manufacturer which appear frequently and make excellent use of the advertising space he purchased. His wares were described in the most flowery of expressions and nearly every advertisement contained poetry/limericks which extolled the value of his products, all the poetry personally compiled it would appear.

Reference has been made chiefly to Cheltenham, and Gloucester, but there is considerable archive material relating to Stroud, including press correspondence and reports, entries in local directories and registers. The congregation formed about 1877 but the purpose built synagogue was not consecrated until 1889. The Cheltenham archives also contain many references to the Stroud Community and for several years shared the services of Shochet and Mohel. The Burial Ground in Cheltenham and Gloucester contains memorials to deceased members of the Stroud Congregation.

Cirencester was not really part of my research, but mention ought to be made of the young Jews who came to the town in 1930s to escape Nazi oppression. Most of them were welcomed by the Hutterite Christian Community which had set up a Commune at Aashton Farm and Oakley Manor Farm near Ashton Keynes, which is actually now in Wiltshire. There the young Jews were trained in farming. Other refugee individuals soon joined them. Also in Cirencester itself, was stationed the 220th Company of the Pioneer Corps of the British Army, composed mainly of Jewish volunteers. A Committee was set up to help them and other refugees in the area and a centre was provided for them at Essex Hall in Coxwell Street. A room in the now demolished Congregational Church was loaned to the small community for use as a synagogue.

Whether Tewkesbury had a post Elizabethan Community – or even an earlier one – is uncertain. Richard Sermon has done a lot of research on the possibility of a Medieval Community following the statement in Counsel's History of the town, 'that a chapel once existed near where the Jews synagogue was', but little evidence is forthcoming.