

JEWISH HERITAGE TOUR



William the Conqueror invited Jews into England from Normandy to help trade; early Medieval Kings were pro-Jewish because they were useful financiers – there is very little evidence of Jews pre-conquest. But from the time of Edward I (1272) Jews were persecuted, as part of general drive of the Catholic Church to repress dissent.

St Wilfrid's R.C. Church (1864)

To the top left of Christ is a female figure representing 'SYNAGOGUE', and to the top right another representing 'CHURCH'. 'SYNAGOGUE' is the Old Testament dispensation, dependent on the Law of Moses, which has proved a broken staff. 'CHURCH' represents the new dispensation since Christ, and is shown with a pastoral staff and communion chalice. 'SYNAGOGUE' is blind (hence the blindfold) whereas 'CHURCH' is shown as a crowned queen. This is a 19th century copy of medieval representations of Judaism. Bottom left is a winged angel driving Adam and Eve from Eden. Eve has usually got the blame for tempting Adam into eating the forbidden fruit, but Adam was as much to blame. Bottom right is the Annunciation – the Archangel Gabriel (male) announcing to Mary that she is to be the Mother of Christ.

This is, therefore, an anti-semitic carving contrasting the disobedience of Adam and the Jews with the obedience of Mary and the Church. This anti-semitism is often reflected in medieval art.

Minster Exterior West Front

Carvings from 1998 depict Genesis cycle including Adam and Eve, Noah and Abraham. The artist is Rory Young of Cirencester. They illustrate the common origin of Judaism and Christianity.

Site of Archbishop's Palace

Look through to Deans Park to the remains of the Archbishop's Palace. In the early 12th century Maurice Prior of Kirkham records that he learnt Hebrew from Jewish scholars in the household of the Archbishop.

St. Michael-le-Belfrey Church

Look at the window to the left of the organ, looking from inside, or 4th from West/right looking from outside. It contains a panel recording the donation of the window in c.1530 by Martin Soza, born in Spain, and a goldsmith. Soza is a Jewish Sephardi name (Sephardi Jews were from Spain/Portugal; Ashkenazi from Germany and E. Europe). Goldsmith is a classic Jewish trade. The Jews were driven out of Spain in 1492, so Martin Soza probably left about then, came to England, converted to Catholicism, married and eventually became Sheriff of York.

Minster Five Sisters Window

(c.1260) Often called Jewish window as it was financed partly by Jewish loans. Look through the south transept door to view it.

Minster Chapter House

After the 1190 Massacre, a mob burst into the Chapter House where copies of deeds and loans and debts owed to Jews were kept and burnt them.

Jewbury

It was excavated in 1982-3. It was probably first used in 1177 when Henry II gave Jews licence to have a burial ground in any city in England. It is known definitely in 1230 when land was sold to York Jews for their cemetery. Remains of nearly 500 individuals were excavated and re-interred by a plaque. Prior to this, all Jews had to be taken to London for burial. Jewbury is about one acre and in the 13th century contained the home of 'Jacob the Cemetery Keeper'. It is the only large scale excavated Jewish burial ground in Europe. There is very little disturbance of the previous burials showing that this was an orderly cemetery. There are remains of nails in coffins, in variance with modern practice. Some coffins were substantial and were perhaps brought some way for burial. Jewbury remained a pasture after 1290 until the 19th century. Their average height of those discovered was 5'5" for males and 5'1" for females – slightly shorter than the rest of the Christian population. They were clustered by sex and age and seem to have had distinctive facial characteristics.

The total number of burials was estimated to 600 adults and 400 children – with evidence of high infant mortality – the rest commonly died during their late 40s-50s. Women seem to have lived longer than York average (compared with St. Helen on the Walls). Anaemia and T.B. were common causes of death visible on the skeleton.

In 1984 Chief Rabbi Lord Jakobovits put a stop to the examination of bones and they were reinterred. 'If these bones lie at peace, civilisation can surely rest.'

Aldwark

There was a synagogue here (now RAF Association). It was in the boarded up part of the building, behind and to the left of the main block on Aldwark. Jews were forbidden to practise money lending from 1275 and they left England in 1290. They were finally expelled as Edward I had found a better source of finance in Florentine bankers. Jews returned under Cromwell in 1656 to help trade and hasten the End of the World as Jews had to be converted first before Christ would return. The first reference to York Jews after 1290 is Isaac Solomon, an embroiderer in Petergate in 1756. Jews returned in numbers from 1880s – their high point was in 1903, with records of 124 Jews. A synagogue was at Aldwark behind the joinery shop. Work ceased when a service was on, as the joiner's wife was a Jewess. The joiner's shop opened in 1892 and closed in 1975 on the death of the last joiner. The Jews left voluntarily, as their numbers were dropping.

Spen Lane

Benedict, who died in the 1190 massacre, lived here, in a stone house 'like a royal palace'. The house was sacked by a mob in 1190. Benedict = Baruk (meaning 'Blessed').

Jubbergate (Jew-bret-gate)

This means a street of Jews in Breton (i.e. French/foreign) quarter. Originally Bretgate – street of Bretons. It was the main Jewish area in York, but it was no ghetto – they lived all over York – North Street, Fossgate, Hungate, Coney Street, etc.

Coney Street

Aaron was the wealthiest Jew in England and from 1236 to 1243 he was the Arch-Presbyter of Jews of England. There was a synagogue near St Martin le Grand, about where 'Next' now is. Aaron lent money for the Five Sisters window. He was the son of Josce/Joseph, who perished in the 1190 massacre.

St Mary, Castlegate

In Jeffery Iverson's book Bloxham Tapes, Bloxham was a hypnotist. He hypnotised Jane Evans, a Welsh housewife. She had had six previous lives. These were in 3rd century Eboracum, a Jewess Rebecca at the time of the massacre, a servant to a 15th century French Merchant, a 16th century Spanish maid, a sewing maid in the 18th century London and a 20th century American nun. She gave her description of the 1190 massacre, including much detail about anti-infidel feeling leading up to the third crusade. She refers to Henry II as a protector of Jews. She says she hid in a church outside the castle by Coppergate in York. Excavations in 1975 revealed a crypt she said she had hidden in. The fact that some Jews survived the massacre suggests that some must have been sheltered by Christians.

Clifford's Tower

Richard I was crowned in September 1189, after the death of Henry II. Some Jews attempted to enter the coronation banquet at Westminster to make gifts. An anti-Jewish riot broke out and one York Jew, Benedict, was wounded. He was possibly baptised, but subsequently recanted. He died at Northampton on his way home and was accorded neither a Christian nor a Jewish burial. Richard left England in December 1189 and issued orders that Jews were to be left in peace. But in Lent, and with the crusade, there was anti-Jewish rioting in King's Lynn, Norwich, Stamford, Lincoln, etc. Early in March 1190, a group of men broke into Benedict's house on Spen Lane and carried off his treasure, killing his widow and children, and setting the house on fire.

The Jews led by Josce, (Joseph), sought shelter in the Castle. The Constable of the Castle gave them refuge, but when he went out, they refused to re-admit him. John Marshall, the Sheriff of Yorkshire, decided to eject the Jews. The mob took this as a signal for general anti-Jewish slaughter. On 16 March (Friday), the eve of the Jewish Sabbath, machines were moved into place to besiege the tower. The Rabbi Yom Tob of Joigny called on the Jews to commit suicide rather than be murdered. This they did

and killed their wives and children first. Then Yom Tob killed Josce, then himself. This was followed by a raging fire, possibly started by the Jews. A few survived, and in moving, begged for mercy in return for baptism. This was granted, but they were murdered. The only Christian casualty was a white robed Premonstratensian hermit killed by the fall of a stone from the castle. The ringleader was one Richard Malebisse, called 'Mala bestia' (evil beast) of Acaster Malbis. He and his co-conspirators (Percy, Fossard) were heavily indebted to Jews and wished to escape debts. They then went to the Chapter House and burnt Jewish bonds, the evidence of their debts. These minor rebellious barons were resentful of Royal rule and attacked the Jews because they were seen as instruments of Royal financial control; their sons were the ones who forced King John to sign the Magna Carta. Richard was very angry and sent the chancellor, William de Longchamp, to punish the rebels. The Sheriff and the Constable were dismissed. Malebisse fled to Scotland, the city was heavily fined, and debts due to Jews had to be paid to the King.

The Jews, however, returned in even greater number, and in the 1240s two York Jews, Leo Episcopus and Aaron of York were recognised as the richest Jews in England. There are two famous elegies on the massacre: by Joseph of Chartres and Menachen Ben Jacob of Worms in the 13th century. There was a ban on Jews living in York placed by Rabbincial authorities in Egypt, but this was ignored or not known of by many, as Jews did resettle in York. It is regarded as lifted since 1990.

A plaque was unveiled here in 1978 by the Jewish Historical Association. There was a service of Reconciliation and Repentance in 1990 at the site, attended by the Chief Rabbi (Immanuel Lord Jacobovits) and the Archbishop of York. At the unveiling, a descendant of Richard Malebise of Acaster Malbis sent a note of regret for the actions of his ancestor. Daffodils were planted in 1995-6 to flower early on the anniversary of the Massacre; also the six petals and yellow colour symbolise the yellow Star of David.

This fact sheet has been provided by YorkWalk. Established in 1990, YorkWalk offers a programme of themed walking tours of York throughout the year. This information is intended to assist journalists with information on different York themes and has been written to give a flavour of York's themed walking tours.

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