



Representative Council of Birmingham and West Midlands Jewry



A Brief History of the Birmingham and West Midlands Jewish Community

The Birmingham Jewish community is reputed to be one of the oldest in the provinces. From as early as 1730, the special manufacturing industries that were springing up all over the City attracted its first Jewish settlers. Indeed, Birmingham became something of a centre for Jewish pedlars, who would travel the surrounding countryside in order to earn their meagre livings.

The first recorded synagogue was in a district known as the Froggery, which roughly covered an area around Station Street and New Street Station. The synagogue was extended in 1791, 1809 and again in 1827. The "Singers Hill" synagogue, which is still in operation, was opened in 1856. According to public records, nearly one hundred Jewish families had made their homes in Birmingham's fashionable Edgbaston suburb by the end of 1871.

In the late 19th century, conditions in central Europe and Russia led to an influx of Jews into the West. Many of these refugees made their new homes in Birmingham and the Jewish population of the city increased once again. Some however, finding the anglicised style of services at Singers Hill uncomfortable, formed their own breakaway minyanim and congregations. These eventually led to the creation of the two other orthodox congregations in Birmingham; the Central Synagogue and the New Synagogue. They were in turn followed by the Liberal Synagogue, formed in the late thirties.

A thriving Centre

Between the two Great Wars, Birmingham thrived as a provincial Jewish centre. A number of Jewish grocery stores and delicatessens had founded sturdy businesses, as had everything from the many Jewish-run fish-and-chip shops to the dozens of Jewish backstreet tailoring workshops, who supplied hand-made suits to retail tailors across the city.

There existed a Jewish area comprising Holloway Head, Hurst Street, Sherlock Street, Ashley Street and Benacre Street. In 1934 the Hebrew School, which had previously formed part of the Singers Hill complex, was moved to a purpose-built site in St. Lukes Road. Side by side with this close ghetto-like existence in the Jewish area, the Jewish residents of Edgbaston and Moseley were also increasing. Families prospered, and as they became more affluent, actively sought these areas' more suburban lifestyle.

Much of this embryonic vibrance was ripped apart, however, by the advent of the 1939-1945 war. During this time, the communal life of the closely-knit Jewish area was shattered through bombing. Sadly, the subsequent redevelopment of the damaged sites left little room for the old Jewish area to reform.

Transformation

Many of the refugees who had fled from Nazi and other persecution had become a part of the Birmingham community in the late thirties. But by the fifties and sixties, a gradual transformation had taken hold, and more and more families began moving out into the suburbs. In this way, the city's Jewish population became spread more thinly across the overall population of 1.25 million people now living in Birmingham. In the late 1950's catered residential accommodation for Jewish male students, Birmingham Hillel House was established in Edgbaston. A girls block was added in the 1970s and today, Birmingham Hillel is recognised as the largest and most successful Hillel in the UK.

together with their own synagogue and Cheder in Monastery Drive. The Central Synagogue moved to a new site on Pershore Road; while the New Synagogue moved to Park Road, Moseley and the Progressive Synagogue established itself in Sheepecote Street.

The Hebrew School also found a new home, this time in Alcester Road, Moseley, where it became the King David School, now operating as a primary school only. But the Jewish population in the late 1960s decreased from an estimated ten thousand to six thousand, although its many institutions and societies were still in operation, vibrant and dynamic as ever.

These included two Homes for the Aged and later a warden controlled project in Rake Way, Edgbaston. Also, a Lubavitch Centre was established in Willows Road in the building known as The MInyan, a small but active shtiebel. Along with the Youth Centre and many social and educational groups, the community was (and indeed, still is) well catered for in all its various religious and social needs.

The 1980s saw a further decline in the Jewish population of Birmingham. Several families made aliya (emigrated to Israel) and others moved to the more densely populated Jewish centres of Manchester and London. In an attempt to realistically assess Birmingham's Jewish population, a census was organised. The results confirmed what many had suspected and feared for some time; a figure emerged of no more than 3,000 Jews who were still resident in the Birmingham area. Steady consideration was given to synagogue amalgamation from the early nineties, but progress was slow and even the most committed could not bring too much enthusiasm to the job of downgrading or dismantling synagogues to which they had belonged all their lives.

In 1993 a newly erected Home for the Elderly, Andrew Cohen House, was officially opened by the Princess of Wales. This project had been planned by the Birmingham Jewish Welfare Board, renamed Birmingham Jewish Community Care, which had spent some time considering a development where sheltered accommodation could parallel a scheme for a residential care home, all on the same site in Stirchley.

The fall in numbers also made itself evident though difficulties in maintaining quorate daily minyanim. A new emphasis was also placed on the necessity of stimulating youth within the community. The Birmingham Jewish Education Board was formed with a view to the future education of the young. An unprecedented debate was held in the Birmingham City Council chambers, once again discussing and attempting to make headway on a synagogue amalgamation plan. At the same time, the Progressive Synagogue held an induction ceremony for Rabbi Dr Margaret Jacobi, its first female rabbi. In 1995, a merger of the Birmingham Hebrew Congregation and the New Synagogue took place and the Moseley synagogue was established in a purpose built extension at the King David school to cater for those members of the amalgamated congregations living in Moseley. Since then, serious merger talks have taken place between Singers Hill and the Central Synagogue with both councils looking seriously to the future. But both have chosen to remain separate congregations. In 2008 the Progressive Synagogue moved from Sheepcote St to the other side of Broad St to its new spacious modern premises in Roseland Way off Bishopgate St. In 2013 work begins to accommodate the Central Synagogue into the renovated and refurbished Malcolm Locker Hall, an exciting project which will enable the Central community to retain its identity in more appropriate surroundings.

Jewish communities in other nearby cities

In nearby **Wolverhampton**, the first synagogue premises as well as a Jews' Boys and Girls School was recorded in 1850 as located in the now demolished St. James' Square, which was also the home of the Rabbi. A dedicated synagogue materialised in 1858 on the corner of Long Street/Fryer Street. In 1902 it suffered a major fire and in 1903 the entire building was largely reconstructed in the Ashkenazian style by Wolverhampton architect Frederick Beck (these plans still exist). The Synagogue's heyday was in the 1930s but after the Second World War the congregation gradually dwindled before transferring to BHC Singers Hill Birmingham in 1999 when a quorum (*minyan*) could no longer be obtained. The old Synagogue is now a Church but is still recognisable as the former Synagogue. The Jewish cemeteries in Wolverhampton are still maintained and used.

Coventry, to the south of Birmingham, had a small Jewish population since 1775 and in 1898, 38 Jews were recorded in the city. The watch-making industry was instrumental in the growth of the community in the late 1800s. The synagogue on Barras Lane was built in 1870 but has now become integrated into the Solihull and District Hebrew Congregation. A Reform Community is active in the city today.

Thankfully, the Birmingham and West Midlands Jewish Community has never lost any of its incredible vibrant energy. When combined with its many resources and its ongoing commitment to a closely meshed community, it is hoped that these assets, which include the significant voluntary contribution of many including the students to all aspects of communal life, will continue to ensure the future of the community for many years to come.

Much of this article was written by Arthur Chesses for our previous website. It has since been updated