
Researching Jewish Ancestry

EARLY HISTORY

After the Norman Conquest of 1066 William the Conqueror encouraged Jewish merchants and craftsmen to move to England from northern France. In Suffolk, Jewish families settled in both Ipswich and Bury. Hatter Street in Bury was called the Jewry or Jews Quarter. According to a rental of 1295 it was known as Heathenmannis Street. Moyses Hall in the centre of Bury, which dates from the 11th or early 12th century was reputedly known as the 'Synagogue of Moses' and was possibly a place of worship. It was later referred to as the 'Jews' House' or the 'Jews' Synagogue'. (Volume 25 of *The Jewish Historical Society Of England – Transactions* contains an article by Edgar R Samuel exploring this supposition. There is a copy in Bury Record Office).

The Jews were expelled from England in 1290 by an edict of Edward I and were not legally allowed to return until 1655. Many records still survive of the Jewish community in the 13th century. Exchequer records (which can be found in The National Archives) record litigation between Jews and Christians. These cases were held in the Exchequer of the Jews. There are also records of taxation of Jewish residents. Volume 32 of the *Transactions of the Jewish Historical Society of England* contains useful information from these records. The transactions are available in the Library of University College London where there is a large Jewish Studies Library.

It was not until the Commonwealth period, in 1655, that Jews were again encouraged to settle. They came first to London and by the 18th century began to establish themselves again in county towns as shopkeepers and tradesmen, particularly in the traditional trades of garment, jewellery, and clock making.

A congregation of Jews had formed in Ipswich by the end of the eighteenth century. They reputedly met for worship in a room in a house in St Clements parish until 1792, when they built a small brick synagogue in Rope Lane. On 27th September 1796 they purchased a 999-year lease on a small plot of ground in Salter's of Salthouse Lane to use as a burial ground. One of the co-founders of the Ipswich Synagogue, Lazarus Levi, may have moved to Ipswich from Bury St Edmunds. There is also a Jewish section in the Ipswich Municipal Cemetery. Cemetery information is available on the Jews of Suffolk website www.jewsofsuffolk.co.uk. By 1850 only five Jewish families - 23 people - resided in Ipswich. The synagogue was allowed to deteriorate until it became unsafe and was demolished in 1877, but the cemetery still remains and is looked after by the Board of Deputies for British Jews (see www.bod.org.uk). The archives of the Board of Deputies are held at the London Metropolitan Archives and can be accessed with the consent of the Board. An application form for access to these archives is available on the website.

In recent times the local Jewish community has been quite small. Some families moved away from Suffolk to cities with large Jewish populations such as London and Manchester, where they had greater opportunities. Others went overseas to America, Canada, Jamaica and Jerusalem. An article in Vol. XL of the *Proceedings of the Suffolk Institute of Archaeology and History* records the

names of the Ipswich families. An appendix to the article lists the memorial inscriptions in the cemetery.

RESEARCHING JEWISH ANCESTRY

Researching Jewish Ancestry can be difficult as many of the records are in Hebrew. Added to this, the names recorded are often the Hebrew or synagogal names, which do not always correspond with the English names used. For example a lady buried in 1695 is identified in her English epitaph as Abigail, wife of Abraham Franks, but her Hebrew epitaph records: Sarah Philia daughter of David Bloch, wife of Naphthali Hirsch Franks. Only the married surname indicates who she is. Dates can also be confusing, as they refer to the Jewish Calendar, which begins each autumn. In order to translate this into a British Year the simplest way is to deduct 3,760 from the Jewish year.

Many Jewish families anglicised their names, or even changed them entirely when they settled in Britain. Denization and nationalisation records may record these changes. The records of these are held in The National Archives, but the Huguenot Society has published lists of these in Vol XVIII of its *Publications*, which covers the period from 1603 to 1700. Phillimore has also published a book, which may be useful – *An Index to changes of name under Authority of Act of Parliament or Royal Licence, including irregular changes – from 1760 to 1901* by Edward Alexander Fry. Copies of both of these are in the Cullum Library in Bury Record Office.

RECORDS OF BAPTISMS/BIRTHS, MARRIAGES AND DEATHS

Baptisms/births

Jewish records may record different events from other English records – for example the circumcision of boys may be recorded rather than their birth. (This usually took place 8 days after the birth but these records are usually difficult to trace as the circumciser kept them). Baptism records are unusual as they only record converts to the faith, rather than those born to Jewish families. English Jews in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries had problems proving descent in order to inherit property because of the lack of evidence of births/baptisms. Heirs sometimes resorted to arranging depositions from midwives who had attended their birth, from other members of the family and even neighbours. Sometimes Jews resorted to paying local clergy to have entries of births and marriages recorded in the parish registers. In 1747, The College of Arms started a register for births of Jews, although the fee for the service was high and relatively few entries were made. In 1764 the Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue began a birth register and eventually other synagogues copied the practice.

Marriages

Jews were exempt from Hardwicke's Marriage Act of 1754 and were allowed to keep their own records of marriage. Weddings were not always recorded in the synagogue's registers but duplicates of the marriage contract would be kept. Marriage records can contain more detail than civil registration certificates. From February 1880 marriage authorisations state the parties' places and country of birth. Certificates of evidence required before a marriage can take place, contain details of the applicant's date and place of birth, and/or marriage abroad. These often refer to people who were never naturalised.

Many marriages of wealthy Jews were recorded in *Gentleman's Magazine*. Bound copies of these from 1731 to 1869 are held in Bury Record Office. From 1837 Jewish marriages were recorded by the civil registration system as synagogues send a copy of their marriage register to the Registrar General. The London Metropolitan Archive holds lists of duplicate marriage registers. Pre-1837 registers might still be held by the synagogue where the marriage took place so an application to the synagogue for access to the register will be necessary.

Deaths/Burials

Synagogue registers are a useful source of information. From 1886 burial authorisations have also included details the party's place and country of birth. Jewish burials can also be found in both parish registers and newspaper reports. *Gentleman's Magazine* is a useful source for obituaries.

HOLOCAUST INFORMATION

Copies of information from German Archives have recently been obtained by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington. Survivors or family members can submit a request for information from the archives; the appropriate form can be found on the museum's Web site at www.ushmm.org/its.

OTHER RECORDS

Synagogue records might also include minute books of the council and lists of founder members and benefactors. Early members often paid taxes to the Synagogues and these would be recorded in the minute books. Commemoration books might list members who have left bequests to the Synagogue and may be of help in tracing the will.

Some early records of synagogues are now located at the Court of the Chief Rabbi, and others are at the Synagogue Record Room. Only limited research facilities are available so most research must be conducted by post for a small fee. The registers and other records held are listed in an article in *Family Tree Magazine*, July 1992. There is a copy of this in Bury Record Office.

Wills and Administrations

Disposal of goods and property came under the Ecclesiastical courts until 1928, when the responsibility was transferred to the District Probate Courts. Jewish wills proved in Archdeaconry or Consistory Courts may be found listed in the indexes to probate records found in local County Record Offices. If the will was proved in the Prerogative Court of Canterbury then the indexes in The National Archives should be checked.

The largest Jewish community has always been in the London area and many settlers stayed with relatives when they first arrived in the country before moving to other areas. It is worthwhile checking London synagogue registers for information about families.

USEFUL ADDRESSES

Court of the Chief Rabbi, Family Division, Beth Din, at Adler House, Tavistock Square, London, WC1H 9HP

Synagogue Record Room, Woburn House, Tavistock Square, London, WC1H 0EZ

The National Archives, Kew, Richmond, Surrey, TW9 4DU

UCL Library, University College London, Gower Street, London, WC1E 6BT

The Jewish Historical Society of England, 33 Seymour Place, London, W1H 5AP

London Metropolitan Archives, City of London, Guildhall, PO Box 270, London, EC2P 2EJ

Bury Record Office, 77 Raingate Street, Bury St Edmunds, IP33 2AR

Telephone: 01284 741212

Email: bury.ro@suffolk.gov.uk

Ipswich Record Office, Gatacre Road, Ipswich, IP1 2LQ

Telephone: 01473 584541

Fax: 01473 584533

Email: ipswich.ro@suffolk.gov.uk

Lowestoft Record Office, Clapham Road, Lowestoft, NR32 1DR

Telephone: 01502 405357

Fax: 01502 405350

Email: lowestoft.ro@suffolk.gov.uk

Suffolk Record Office web site: <http://www.suffolk.gov.uk/sro>

Suffolk Heritage Direct website: <http://www.suffolkheritagedirect.org.uk>