

## Jewish Trail App Script

### STOP ONE

#### Introduction

Welcome to the York Jewish heritage trail. I'm Jonathan Cowap and I'll be your guide. The trail begins in Museum Street, close to the Visitor Information Centre and the Yorkshire Museum.

The history of Jewish communities in England is long and complex. The Jews of York have a special place in this story.

While the massacre at **York's** Clifford's Tower in 1190 is the most infamous episode in York's Jewish history it is only one part of a long and fascinating story. Jewish communities first came to Britain in significant numbers after 1066 and Jews, unlike the rest of the English population, were made direct subjects of the king and had no feudal or financial loyalty to local landowners.

At that time it was considered sinful for Christians to lend money for profit but Jews, not sharing this restriction, were free to act as moneylenders. By making Jews his direct subjects the king had full access to this source of revenue and was also able to collect heavy taxes from them.

Anti-Semitism was widespread in medieval Europe and the massacre at Clifford's Tower was not an isolated act of

anti-Semitism in medieval England - it was decreed in 1218 that Jews identify themselves by wearing a badge marking themselves out as Jewish. England was the first, but certainly not the last European nation, to institute such a law.

In 1290 Edward I expelled the entire Jewish population of England, perhaps as many as 5000 people. All Jewish property was seized by the crown and all outstanding debts to that community were instead made payable to the king.

Oliver Cromwell gave informal permission for the Jews to return to England in 1656, but Jewish communities did not return to England in significant numbers until the nineteenth century.

Despite the decline of anti-Semitism in Britain and the widespread participation of Jews in British commercial and public life throughout the nineteenth century, Jews only gained legal equality with most of the British population in 1890.

## **Stop Two**

### **The Norman House**

The courtyard containing the remains of the Norman House is accessed via a doorway on Stonegate marked with a plaque above the door. If the door is locked a key can be obtained from the office of the church St Michael-le-Belfrey. This is located on Deangate opposite the entrance to York Minster's gift shop. Once in the courtyard stop to

listen about the Norman House and the early Jewish community in York.

You are now standing within the remains of the oldest house in York. This house was built between 1170 and 1180. It is around this time that we have the first evidence of a Jewish community in York.

This community had very strong links with, and perhaps originated from, the well-established Jewish community in Lincoln. By the mid-1170s two individuals, Benedict and Joceus, were working in York on behalf of the great Aaron of Lincoln, probably the leading Jew in England. After Aaron's death in 1186 the York-based Benedict and Joceus emerge as major financiers and moneylenders in the North of England.

In the late twelfth century, there were between 150 and 200 Jews living in York. They all lived close to the principal commercial areas of the city - Coney Street, Walmgate, and Pavement. We know Benedict's house was in Spen Lane; there was no ghetto. They worked as pawnbrokers, peddlars, physicians, landlords, scholars, coin minters as well as money-lenders. This broad spectrum of activities hints at a lack of tension with the wider community.

The twelfth century was a period of growing prosperity for all of York's communities and this prosperity can be seen in the increased use of stone to build houses. The Norman House is an example of this late twelfth century boom in stone construction undertaken by the burgeoning merchant and administrative classes. It is the only

surviving example from this period of domestic architecture in York.

Stone houses such as this one had a large hall on the first floor. Look at the line of red brick remaining on the right hand wall - this was the floor level of that large hall which was used as living quarters. The undercroft below was simply used for storage.

The nearest surviving counterpart to the Norman House is that of the so-called "Jew's House" in Lincoln which has been linked to medieval Jewish ownership. The surviving window which you can see here above the line of red brick is almost identical to that in Lincoln, and both houses were built around the same time.

Although we know this house was built by the Christian Church, we know from contemporary accounts that the wealthy members of the Jewish community in York might have lived in houses like this. The house of Joceus was described by the chronicler William of Newburgh as "a house of the largest extent in the midst of the city, which might be compared to royal palaces."

Most 12th century houses were built in timber so stone houses would have stood out as grand, impressive buildings belonging to the wealthy. The Norman House provides both an impression of the housing that would have belonged to leading Jewish individuals and evidence of prosperity and growth in twelfth century York.

## **Stop Three**

### **Jewbury Cemetery**

In 1982 archaeologists working on this site - destined to be the new multi-storey car-park for Sainsbury's in Jewbury - discovered the "lost" cemetery of York's medieval Jews.

Although it was known that a medieval Jewish cemetery was located in the Jewbury area, when human remains were discovered during the 1982 trial excavations, their identification as Jewish burials was rejected. There were discrepancies between burial practices at Jewbury and what would be expected in Jewish burials - the archaeologists found iron nails in coffins rather than wooden pegs; the lack of tombstones; and a north-south alignment of burials rather than an east-west alignment to Jerusalem. This led the London Beth Din to decide there was "no positive grounds that this was the actual site of the Jewish cemetery or that the human remains found on this site are positively of Jewish origin".

So in 1983 the York Archaeological Trust excavated the site as they would any other non-Jewish cemetery, recording and removing a total of 482 individuals. But during the excavation and subsequent analysis it became clear that the burials were almost certainly from York's medieval Jewish community.

The Chief Rabbi stepped in and argued that analysis should stop and the remains be reburied as soon as possible. The archaeologists agreed and the excavated

skeletons were re-interred close to the car park on July 8, 1984. A discreet plaque on the side of the car park commemorates the event. At least a further 500 burials within the Jewbury cemetery lie undisturbed under the car-park.

The cemetery was in use from around 1177 AD until 1290. It has been estimated that the entire cemetery may have contained over 1,000 burials since only those parts of the cemetery directly threatened by the foundations for the car park were excavated.

Most of the bodies had their arms at their sides; some had been wrapped in shrouds. There were few personal items found within the graves. Unlike medieval Christian burials these burials were evenly spaced with little disturbance of earlier graves by later ones. This suggests that graves had been marked in some way, however there is no evidence of tombstones or other grave markers. Contemporary accounts of medieval Jewish cemeteries describe them as "Jew's Gardens" and it is likely that the Jewbury cemetery would have contained trees and shrubs as well.

This uniformity suggests that there were very specific burial customs in use and that great care was taken when preparing individuals for burial.

Although scientific analysis of the recovered remains was cut short, the York Archaeological Trust was able to report some interesting findings.

Compared to other medieval burials from York, individuals from Jewbury were slightly shorter on

average; a greater proportion of the women reached old age; they shared ailments such as anaemia, tuberculosis, and sinus infections. In contrast to other burial sites, there were fewer instances of traumatic injuries and there was no evidence that victims of the 1190 massacre were buried here. But there was one young man who had suffered a deep wound to the front of his skull, remarkably the wound showed evidence of attempted surgery.

As one of only ten known Jewish cemeteries in medieval England and the only one to be extensively excavated, the cemetery in Jewbury offers a tantalizing glimpse into the lives and deaths within this lost community.

## **Stop Four**

### **Aldwark Synagogue**

This site is rather surprisingly one of the most important in the modern Jewish history of York. As recently as 1975, Bulmers, the former joiner's shop behind 3 Aldwark was used as a synagogue.

The synagogue and its community were founded in 1886 at a time when Jews were finally beginning to return to York in numbers, reaching 124 individuals by the 1903 census. There was a close relationship with the joiner's shop - work would stop when a service was held as the joiner's wife was a Jewish woman - and when the joiner's shop closed in 1975 so did the synagogue.

This site sheds some light on one of the famous ideas or myths about York's Jewish history. Some believe there was

a Jewish curse called a “Cherem” placed on York, forbidding Jews to eat or sleep in the city. The origins of this are obscure and no early reference to the Cherem can be found. Nevertheless, its origins have been linked to the massacre of York's Jews in 1190, and some people have used the suggestion of a Cherem to explain why Jews never really returned to York in significant numbers.

However the Jewish community in York in the 13th century was large and wealthy - we know this from property documents and from the burials at Jewbury. But between the expulsion of the Jews in 1290 and the time of the major Jewish immigration to England in the nineteenth century York lost its role as an important political and economic centre. For immigrants in the nineteenth century, whose livelihood depended on trade and commerce, there was no real incentive to live in York. In this light it is easier to understand why it is only in 1886 that York's first post-medieval synagogue is opened and why the Jewish population of York was so small. It also explains why Jewish communities were able to re-establish themselves in industrial cities like London, Leeds and Manchester, but not York.

At the time of the Second World War many refugees, mostly Jews, were brought to the city by the York Refugee Committee and by May 1939 there were 118 refugees here. The 2001 census showed nearly 200 individuals considered themselves Jewish, including these refugees who had chosen to stay in York.

## **Stop Five**



## Jubbergate

Jubbergate originally ran from Coney Street to Newgate. Today, the name Jubbergate applies only to the short stretch of road between Newgate Market and Parliament Street.

The buildings standing here now are of much later construction but thirteenth century deeds for property along Jubbergate are still held by York Minster, the Merchant Adventurers' Hall and York City Archives. Some of these deeds refer to Jubbergate under its original medieval name: Bretgate. The earliest reference to Bretgate comes in 1249. The name Bretgata was formed by joining two separate words; 'Bretta': from the Old English meaning Britons and 'gata' the Old Norse word for street or road. However, there were two Bretgates in York and the confusion this may have caused might account for the street's name change in later deeds. In a deed of 1280 it is called Jewe Bretgate, with a slightly different version, Jewe Bretagata, appearing in deeds of 1287 and 1302.

The addition of a Middle English prefix 'Jewe' to this Bretgate suggests that Jewish homes and businesses were once prominent here.

Jubbergate (as Jewebretgate came to be known) would have been a convenient location for York's medieval Jewish community because the medieval street originally extended to Coney Street, the location of the synagogue, as well as the homes of other twelfth and thirteenth century Jews.

Maybe Jewish residents of York worked and lived along Jubbergate at the time of the Jewish massacre in 1190. Perhaps it was survivors of the massacre or newly arrived Jews who occupied this lane in the thirteenth century when the street name was changed from Bretgate to Jewe Bretgate. Or was the name change purely based on local memories about Jews who had once lived in the neighbourhood?

Without documentary or archaeological evidence we can only speculate. Perhaps someday new evidence may arise that will tell us more about Jubbergate and its place in the lives of medieval York's Jewish community.

## **Stop Six**

### **The Medieval Synagogue**

Coney Street today is one of York's busiest shopping streets. In the Middle Ages it was one of the city's wealthiest and important streets. It also was the heart of the medieval Jewish community of York.

We know that the modern building housing the Next store stands on the site of what was a "schola" or synagogue, a Jewish place of worship, during the 13th century.

Near the schola were the homes of several nationally important Jews: Aaron of York and his father-in-law, Leo Episcopus, were considered in 1219 to be amongst the six richest Jews in England. Between 1236 and 1243 Aaron was Arch-presbyter of the English Jews; the pre-eminent Jew in England.

We don't know what the schola would have looked like - but it is possible that the medieval Jews of York built their synagogue in a similar style to other buildings in town, perhaps not unlike the Norman House.

The financial success of the Jewish community meant that taxes paid to the king became heavier and heavier. When Leo Episcopus died, his son Samuel had to pay 7,000 marks to the king to be able to take over the affairs of his father. 7,000 marks was a huge sum of money, the equivalent of about £2.5m today. The increasing severity of taxes levied on individuals was so great, that when Aaron died in York in 1268, he died penniless.

By the 1270s, York's Jewish community was in serious decline and faced significant anti-Semitism. Josce, who owned the house next to his uncle Aaron, was hanged for financial misdemeanour in London in the late 1270s and in 1279 Henry III's widow, Queen Eleanor, granted the area around the schola to two non-Jewish citizens of York. When Edward I expelled the Jews from England in 1290, only six Jewish households remained in York, including one on Coney Street, which was the home of a Jewish man named Bonamicus.

In later years, this area of Coney Street became the site of a medieval coaching inn called the George Inn. There's a plaque on the wall recording the site of the Inn, but despite this area being at the heart of the Jewish community in York, there is no mention of the site's relevance to Jewish history in the city.

## **Stop Seven**

### **Clifford's Tower**

Clifford's Tower stands on the site of the most infamous event in York's Jewish past. On March 16th 1190 a wave of anti-Semitic riots culminated in the massacre of some 150 Jews - possibly the entire Jewish community of York - who had taken refuge in York Castle.

Anti-Semitic feeling was running high throughout Western Europe in the twelfth century, stoked by Christian fervour for the Crusades. England's new king, Richard I, was about to set off on crusade himself, and then at his coronation banquet in 1189, prominent Jews, including Benedict of York, attempted to attend to pay their respects but were denied entry. In the riots that followed Benedict was mortally wounded but Joceus escaped back to York. Outrage at these events in London, led to a wave of attacks on Jews that spread across England.

Then in March 1190 a mob, egged on by local gentry Richard Malebisse, William Percy, Marmeduke Darell, and Philip de Fauconberg burned and looted Benedict's house, killing members of the family. The Jewish Community were under the King's protection and fled to the safety of the royal castle where Clifford's Tower now stands.

Unfortunately the royal constable arrived too late, the sheriff was out of town and the York mob laid siege to the wooden keep where the Jews were sheltering. Evidence of what then occurred comes from chronicles written some years later. These suggest that Rabbi Yomtob and Joceus

appealed to the **Jewish** community to take their own lives rather than be burnt alive.

Nearly all of York's Jewish community perished that day, some by suicide and others from fire and violence at the hands of the citizens. Twentieth century excavations at Clifford's Tower have revealed the blackened remains of the fire. After the massacre the leaders of the mob betrayed their true motives by going to York Minster to burn the documents detailing their debts to the Jews. With these records gone they would not have to pay the King, to whom payment of the debt would otherwise transfer.

At the foot of Clifford's Tower a plaque commemorates the massacre. It was unveiled by the Chief Rabbi, the president of the Jewish Historical Society, and the Lord Mayor of York in October 1978.

A few years later, in 1990 specially selected six-petal daffodils, representing the Star of David, donated by the American Jewish Foundation, were planted by English Heritage. These bloom every year around mid-March, close to the anniversary of the massacre.

Every January 27th the world commemorates the victims of Holocausts on Holocaust Memorial Day. This international event, aimed at remembering the past to build a better future, has been marked in the UK since 2001. Clifford's Tower is the focus of York's Holocaust Memorial Day events.