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Historic Churches



The Exeter Synagogue
Exeter

12th December 2024

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laugh,
live

The Exeter Synagogue



The Exeter Synagogue is the third oldest still functioning Synagogue in England, and dates back to 1764.

King Edward I had all Jews expelled from England from 1290 and this order remained in place until it was reversed by Cromwell. The first Jew to return to Exeter was reputed to be Jacob Monis, a learned Jew born in Padua, who



advertised his services as a translator in the *Flying Post* in 1724. Others followed including a snuff maker and a shochet (butcher). In 1757 the small community leased land for the burial ground at Bull Meadow just outside the city walls. A Synagogue does not require consecrated ground, just ten men and a place for an Ark so six years later, Abraham Ezekiel, along with Kitty Jacobs, leased a small plot of land in Synagogue Place, behind St Mary Arches Church, and the newly built synagogue, designed by Stephen Emanuel, was opened on 10th August, 1764, in a ceremony in which the **Torah** was carried seven times around the **Bimah**, followed by the singing of the National Anthem. The Ezekiel family remained influential in the life of the Synagogue for around 75 years. Their descendents emigrated to America but still support the Synagogue until this day.

On 21 July 2018, the synagogue was subject to an arson attack, from a far-right extremist. He broke a window and set light to an accelerant. In total

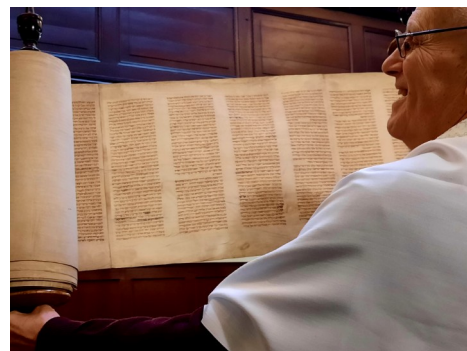
£23,000 of damage was done to the building. The perpetrator was given a hospital order without limit.

The gallery in orthodox synagogues was for the women while the men sat downstairs. Today this synagogue, although Orthodox in layout, has nearly all the services taking place in the Reform tradition, with men and women sitting together and with women allowed to take the service.

The centrepiece of the downstairs level is the **Bimah**, or platform, from where the **Torah** is read and services are conducted. The **Torah** is a series of scrolls of parchment wound on two wooden rods which contain the text of the first five books of the Old Testament, or Pentateuch. The Torah is divided into sections, one portion read on the Sabbath through the year as a cycle starting at our New Year in September/October. A small section of that week's Sabbath reading is also read at the morning service on Thursday as an introduction. Other services in the week, other than festivals, are just made up of prayers.



(Left) The Bimah, or platform from where the Torah is read, and services are led.



(Right) One of the scrolls of the Torah

The **Sefer Torah**: each scroll is written on pieces of parchment sewn together, the parchment made from the skin of a naturally deceased cow or stillborn calf. Each scroll contains the first five books of the Old Testament, the Torah (Hebrew for 'teaching') which Jews believe God handed down to mankind as a moral, social and legal code for life. Exeter is fortunate in having six scrolls, all with the same text written on them. Each contains 613 commandments, represented symbolically by the seeds of a pomegranate. The pomegranate is the sign of fertility, abundance, righteousness, knowledge and wisdom. It is also revered for the beauty of its shrub, flowers and fruit.

Closed Ark



The Torah scrolls are kept in the **Ark** at the front of the Synagogue on a wall facing Jerusalem. This is the holiest place in the Synagogue. It is constructed from soft wood, carefully decorated to look as if it were made from exotic marble. Above the Ark are

tablets inscribed with an abridged version of the ten commandments and along the top is written a quotation from Psalms 5:8 which is traditionally said on entering the Synagogue. The scrolls in the Ark are dressed in their **Mantles** and on top of each is a silver finial (**Rimmonium**) decorated with tiny bells.

On the front of each scroll is a silver **breastplate** which is a reminder of the breastplate worn by the High Priest in the days of the Temple.

Open Ar



Alongside, and on the left of the Ark is an alcove containing the Perpetual Light, or **Ner Tamid**, which burns continuously in remembrance of the light in the Temple in Jerusalem until its destruction in 70CE. In a corresponding alcove to the right of the Ark is the **Menorah**, or candelabrum which usually has seven branches.



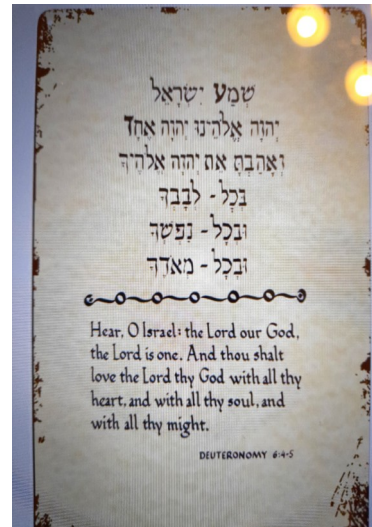
Stewart wearing his yarmulke and tallith



Other symbols of the Jewish religion include the **Yarmulke**, or scullcap made of cloth, and **Tallith**, or fringed prayer shawl. The yarmulke is worn in public by orthodox Jews and during prayer by other Jews. The Tallith has special twined and knotted fringes known as **tzitzit** attached to the four corners. Each tassel has eight threads when doubled over and five sets of knots. The sum of all the numbers is again 613, the traditional

number of commandments in the Torah. The main cloth part is known as the **beged** and is usually made of cotton or wool.

The 'Shema' Prayer: this important prayer with its ideas of 'hearing' but not seeing God and the statement of a single divine being is written on a small piece of parchment and placed in a box attached to the door frame. The box is called a **'mezuzah'** (Hebrew for doorpost) and is found on all Jewish buildings and homes on the left hand side as you exit. By touching it as you exit and enter, you are reminding yourself of God's commandments.



The Ezekiel family in Exeter

Abraham Ezekiel and his brother Benjamin had arrived in Exeter in the 1740s from the Rhineland. Abraham was a silversmith and watchmaker admired for his craft by the local gentry. He became a founder member of the fledgling Jewish community and in 1753 was joint purchaser of the land on which the Synagogue stands. His eldest son, Ezekiel Abraham Ezekiel, was born in 1757 in Exeter, and at the age of 17 was apprenticed to a local goldsmith and engraver. He became a noted engraver, producing, amongst other things, a number of bookplates one of which is now in the Jewish Museum while several others are now in the British Museum. He later added optometry to his skills. He died in

Abraham and his wife split up a few years before the death of Ezekiel. Ezekiel's skills had had some financial effect and on his death his estate was valued at just under £600. He left £8 to the Synagogue for the purchase of a clock with a commemorative inscription on the dial.

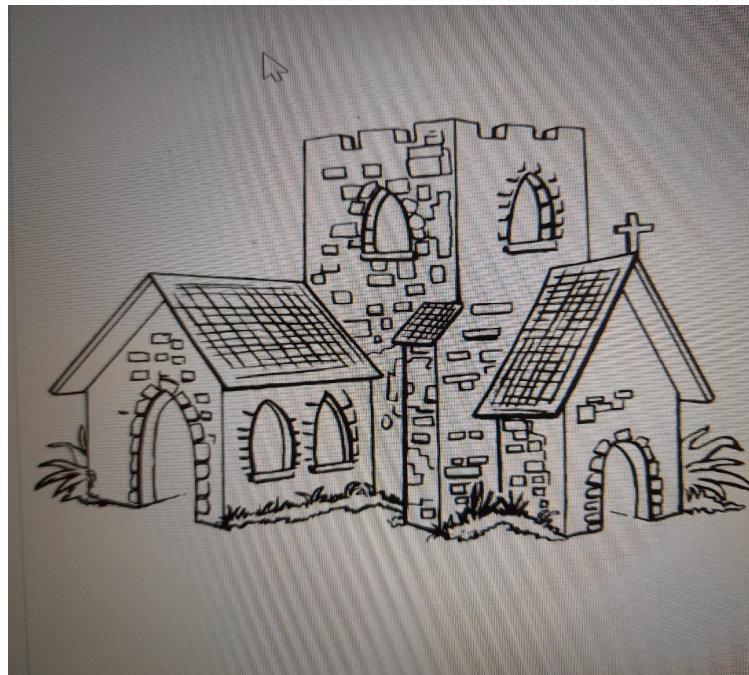


The Jewish Cemetery

In 1757 Exeter City Council granted a 99 year lease to Abraham Ezekiel “determinable on three lives” at a yearly rent of 10s 6d. When the last of the three ‘lives’ mentioned in the lease died, the lease ended. The lease started from May 1757 for a consideration of 5s on the lives of Abraham (aged 31), his daughter Rose (aged 2) and Israel Henry, son of Israel Henry (also aged 2). The lease was renewed in 1803 for the same consideration but double the rent by Moses Mordecci (silversmith). Four years later he took out a new lease for the original ground plus an adjoining plot. Subsequently the freehold was purchased by the congregation and the burial ground is still in use.



Contributions of photographs and text from Greg Arnold, Pat Arnold, Val Frod, Janet Hood, Marilyn Medforth . Special thanks to Stewart Raine, our Guide, for his helpful additions and corrections.



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