

3: Despised among men: the end of Anglo-Jewry

Apart from a mikvah found in Milk Street in 2001, London's medieval Jews have left few physical traces above ground, we have mostly written records of their presence. The 17th century antiquarian John Stow wrote that in London in 1215, various nobles first took assurance of the citizens, then break into the Jew's houses search their coffers to fill their own purses then repaired the walls and gates of the city with stone taken from the Jew's broken houses. This civic minded violence partially explains why even the substantial stone homes of the richest Jews do not survive. Why did the Jews' Christian neighbours give the barons their assurance? Perhaps the answer can be found in another Cathedral City.

At Norwich in 1144 an apprentice tanner called William was found dead. Local churchmen cultivated a fantastic tale of William having been ritually sacrificed by local Jews possibly in order to foster religious tourism around a local cult or to create leverage in a monastic turf war. In any case, the lie of William of Norwich created a template into which other unexplained deaths could be made to fit at the heart of which always Jews were accused of religiously inspired murder.

Meanwhile, in fact, throughout the years of medieval Jewish settlement in England, Crusaders fought their way to Jerusalem and beyond. They slaughtered Jews everywhere from the Rhineland to Eretz Israel. If blood libels whetted appetites for eradication of Jewish communities, the Crusades showed how such aspirations might be bloodily fulfilled.

The fantasy story of William of Norwich was followed by similar stuff at Gloucester in 1168, Bury Saint Edmunds in 1181, and Bristol in 1183. Roger of Howden who would travel with King Richard on the Third Crusade wrote about that king's coronation at Westminster in 1189. The Jew's leaders despite the prohibition of the king attended the coronation feast. As this prohibition was known, people pushed the Jews, spoiled them and beat them, and inflicted blows, and cast them out from the court of the king's house. But some were killed, left half dead.

The persecutors were severe on the Jews, they rushed in upon the Jews of the city and they stripped them and lead them to slaughter. Men and women and burned their homes to ashes and embers. A few of the Jews though escaped the murder, including

those within the tower of London and concealed in the houses of their neighbours. One of those killed was one of the Tosafot mentioned at our last stop, Rabbi Jacob of Orléans.

The following spring in 1190 the Jewish community of York died together. The next day a mob at Bury Saint Edmunds murdered 57 Jews, nine easters after the local blood libel was first dripped into the ears of the people there.

While Richard crusaded, his brother King John ruled with difficulty. The barons resisted paying for Plantagenet adventures in Palestine and seethed when in order to ensure that rivals were bankrupted, the king's courtiers took on loans made by Jews. The barons therefore, extracted the Magna Carta from John limiting when and to what extent debt could be recovered by Jewish lenders. John himself turned on the Jews even as his depredations impoverished them. From one Aaron of Bristol, John extracted teeth in lieu of a contribution towards a 66,000 marks payment, worth tens of millions of pounds today which was levied on Anglo Jewry in 1210. Others lost eyes.

Levies for another 200,000 marks were imposed between 1219 and 1272 when the Great Synagogue in Old Jewry was confiscated at the instigation of neighbouring monks. In 1239 each Jew was taxed one third of their property. Sporadic financial raids and cancellations of debts stopping any chance of recovery were interspersed with physical attacks.

At Easter 1265, it is recorded that the Jews of London were destroyed and all their property was stolen. Many of them were stripped naked and attacked and afterwards murdered during the night. 500 of them were murdered.

In 1275 usury was banned. In 1279 300 Jews held at the tower accused of coin clipping were executed. A poem by Meyer Ben Elijah of Norwich lamented, "The land exhausts us by demanding payments and the people's disgust is heard they make our yoke heavier they are finishing us off they continually say of us let us despoil them until the morning light."

In 1290 taking only what they could carry, the wretched Jews of England were expelled to France by Edward the First. Stone houses had not saved them.