

1: Genése or Genesis: origins of the Jews in England

Hopefully you have made your way to the balcony of Defoe House in the Barbican Estate and are looking down at Thomas More Garden. I'm Ben Voss, and we're here to begin our journey through the history of Jews in London and the place of the United Synagogue in that history. Note that I said the Jews in and not of London, this is because our story doesn't start with Jews belonging here.

In the 1920s 40 miles from here, at Flitwick in Bedfordshire, a schoolteacher found a fourth century pottery lamp in a gravel pit and on that lamp was engraved a small menorah. The lamp, maybe even the person who left it in Flitwick, certainly came from Byzantine Palestine. But apart from that lamp, nothing found so far elsewhere in Britain even hints at a Jewish presence in these islands during the Roman period or for a long time afterward.

When the Romans ruled here from the first to the 5th centuries of the Christian era the Barbican really was a Barbican, a fortified and garrisoned section of the Roman walls around Londinium the capital of the province of Britannia. The Romans left Britannia as their empire contracted and fell but the walls of their capital remained to be inherited by invading Saxons and later the Normans.

After 1066, when the Norsemen of Normandy invaded Anglo-Saxon England and began their transformation of English society, William Duke of Normandy repaired the walls of London. He set about extracting what he could from the English economy to fund a program of castle building and church construction in order to subjugate the Anglo-Saxon population by force and thought. Norman nobles and knights also needed access to capital, lending at interest was generally forbidden to Christians by the church. To finance his projects then William needed people who weren't Christian.

He already knew such people, in Rouen, in his ducal lands of Normandy where a Jewish community appears to have been established under the Romans flourished somewhat and even to have built a yeshiva. The Jews of Rouen provided an entry point to trade with North Africa and the Mediterranean and may have been courted for their links to the Rhineland where other established Jewish communities had access to locally mined silver. So, from around 1070, Rouen Jews were brought over to add breadth to the English economy.

Before us in what is now a private garden for the inhabitants of the Barbican Estate lies the cemetery of the early medieval Jews, just outside the city walls. For the first century of Jewish settlement in England, no other place of burial was permitted. The Jewish dead of York or Leicester were buried here.

A building which might have been used for preparing bodies for burial seems to have survived as a dovecot into the 1400s, but summer houses aside most of the site has never been built on. Graves excavated after World War 2 were found to be empty, although a dog carcass lay in one. Where the Jews exhumed their dead for relocation, all the graves were desecrated, is unknown.

Silver aside, the Jewish money lenders some of whom were buried here, offered another advantage to the Norman state. They had no choice but to serve the king, because Jews were not subjects of the crown with established rights however limited those might have been for the average peasant. The Jews were physically safe only when the king personally ensured their safety. Danger might come from religiously inspired mobs or debtors who sought to kill their creditors rather than pay.

Outside the church and excluded over the years from membership of the guilds which controlled who could practice which trade and craft, outside the very population and hated by many. Jews were nevertheless vital to the economy of early medieval England as such, for as long as their economic usefulness to the king lasted they were safe. The Jews were in London then and elsewhere, but they were certainly not of London.

To continue the tour, tap the next stop button on this page. You will find written directions and also a map, which if you've got a smartphone can guide you to the next location, the Church of Saint Lawrence Jewry. When you arrive, Rabbi Yoni Birnbaum will speak on how the first English Jews lived.