

7: Beware Woolfs and Lyons: Jews at the edge of town

The beast most associated with London heraldry is a dragon not a wolf. The wolf's head on Aldgate Pump is no symbol of London at all but a symbol of the edge of London where ancient London finishes and something else begins. The animal portrayed on the pump supposedly commemorates the killing of the last wolf seen in London, the quintessential animal of wildness and threat.

The Aldgate was one of the medieval gateways into old walled London. Beyond it was the Houndsditch where mutts and scavengers ranged. It was at this edge of the city that the Jews settled after the readmission in 1655. This was not the heart of government, Westminster, it was not the centre of fashion, Piccadilly perhaps, nor was it the safest place in London near the Tower. East of here, increasingly after the readmission, were sighted people and trades connected to the sea and to sailors. This part of London was downwind figuratively and literally.

Well into the 19th century, Jews were on the edge here, geographically of course. The site of the Great Synagogue founded about 1690 was also the site of another bastion of the Roman wall. But also figuratively marginalized at the edge of legal existence, the edge of culture, the edge of acceptance. Jews could not vote let alone stand for parliament. Jews could not receive commissions in their majesties armed forces. Nor could Jews gain degrees from the old universities. Nor could they even open shops in the city.

Considering a Bill for Jews to be permitted to stand for election to Parliament in 1833, the Duke of Wellington compared their situation to that of recently emancipated Roman Catholics. The Jews had no such complaint to make; they had never enjoyed privileges and therefore could not claim their restoration the condition of the Jews had in fact been much improved. All that could be contended in favour of this Bill was that the present was the age of liberal principles and that this Bill suited the Liberal principles of the age.

Two years after the Iron Duke's speech in 1835, a successful and highly respected Jewish banker named David Salomons was elected Sheriff of the city of London. Because he would have had to swear on the true faith of a Christian, Salomons didn't take up this post until the passing that same year of the Sheriff's Declaration Act, a parliamentary response to his win embodying the liberal principles disparaged by

Wellington. The act allowed for a Jewish alternative oath. For years to come, Salomons won increasingly important roles, which he was effectively unable to begin, precluded as a faithful Jew from taking Christian oaths. Through his loyalty to his faith and the support of the Liberal Party, the city of London establishment, and the electorate of Greenwich, Salomons was able significantly to advance formal Jewish emancipation.

When elected to Parliament itself for Greenwich in 1851, Salomons refused to swear the legally required Christian oath. But in what the Jewish Chronicle called at the time a noble stand and what we might call direct action, he took his seat anyway, spoke in debates, and even voted. He was ejected by the Sergeant at Arms from the House of Commons and was very heavily fined. Only seven years later was the law changed and the newly elected Lionel Rothschild able to take his seat without a Christian oath. Salomons himself returned to the city to be elected Lord Mayor in 1855, then stood successfully at Greenwich again in 1859. No less impressively perhaps, Salomons was also elected a member of the United Synagogue Council.

Shortly before his death in 1873, Salomons was awarded a baronetcy, effectively a hereditary knighthood. Nathan Mayer Rothschild, the son of Lionel de Rothschild, Salomon's ally in advancing Jewish rights in the Commons was made a baron, a peer of the realm with a seat in the house of Lords in 1885. So much for the Anglo Jewish upper crust.

The JC reported that after Salomon's funeral cortege left his home in Great Cumberland Place in the West End, it paused outside the Central Synagogue where Sir David was a member. Then on reaching Aldgate, crowds were found awaiting the approach of the procession. The throng consisted of many of the working men and women of our community and a like throng extended some distance. We cannot help regarding this silent demonstration as a respectful mark of appreciation of Sir David's services on behalf of our industrial brethren.

Sir David Salomons' remarkable life story is not just a tale of a moneyed establishment accommodating some equally moneyed but slightly quirky new members. Liberal principles were now law. As the JC recognised implicitly when they spoke of the Jews crowding these streets 150 years ago, the Victorian United Kingdom was opening up to them too. The wolves were backing off in Parliament and if we didn't want to be at the edge anymore, we didn't have to be.