



## How to explore the history of a London synagogue and community

This guide will explain how to explore the history of a synagogue and its community. It will describe the research process you might go through and the kinds of sources that will be useful. It also suggests how you might publish the history of a synagogue.

### Introduction

Researching and writing the history of a synagogue is a rewarding and fascinating activity. You do not need to be a professional historian to do it – what is required is enthusiasm and dedication to complete the project, along with some detective skills to find the right sources, common sense to ask the right questions as you go along, to be as thorough and systematic as you can be and to decide on the choice of the right format to present your findings. Your work could result in a description and history of a synagogue building, or the story of that building and the community who used it.

Researching the history of a synagogue does not have to be the work of just one researcher and it can often be very rewarding to create a research group to capture, record and present a community history. This can cut down some of the work-load of researching and writing, but does need careful organising and consideration of the skills and contributions that members of a group and team can make. Also, a community based project can provide excellent means of promoting community outreach, both within and out-side of a particular community.

The presentation of your history can be in any format that suits your needs and audience. It does not have to be a book or traditional historical pamphlet (though these are good ways to sum up your findings) as now there are many other options presented by the growth of accessible media in recent years, which can cost very little to make other than your time and commitment.

You could consider making a video documentary, a Power Point presentation, a digital story using Word Movie Maker (or similar programme), or a web-site, or web-pages, that could be included in an existing web-site such as a community website or historical society web-site. You could also prepare an exhibition, which could be produced in Microsoft Publisher or similar and printed at a commercial printer for a relatively modest cost. The important thing is to find a way of recording what you have found, so that it can be preserved and shared with others for some time to come and hopefully to inspire others.

## Synagogues and their communities

The history of a synagogue can be seen to be in two inter-wined components – there is the history of the building and its architecture and the story of the community or communities who have built and used it. In the Jewish context this is particularly important as there has rarely been a distinction between religious and social life in the communities and the synagogue has always functions as a social and community centre, hence the Jewish tradition of talking in services and traditional allegations that Jewish worship lacked decorum!

At **JTrails**, our experience is that the physical history of a building is an important starting point, but what the history of a building is really about are the people who saw fit to create and use it. A community building, like a synagogue, is very much a stage for the life of a community and the individuals who have used it. Therefore it is important in writing the history of a synagogue to present both the architectural history, as well as to give space and time to the life of the community who created used the building.

This guide focuses on researching the history of synagogues dating from the re-admission of the Jews to England in 1655 and onwards. From the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century onwards Jews re-settled in England, firstly in London and then eventually moved outwards into the provinces. When Jews moved out from London, they would usually settle in small numbers in a particular place and if the economic possibilities of the place proved to be satisfactory a settlement of a small number of Jews might be formed – perhaps a few individuals and a family or two. These settlements would not constitute a community as such, as settlements would not have the resources to either secure a building or form the minimum religious quorum of ten men (a *minyan*) needed to hold traditional Jewish services. Rooms in homes or workshops might be used as informal places of worship. Synagogues were usually only founded once the community could afford to obtain rooms, or a building, on a more permanent basis, and there were sufficient adult male members to hold a regular *minyan*. At this point a community might be formally constituted and a new community formed. Typically synagogues were often in rented and adapted buildings and it would only be possible further down the line for the community to be able to lease a suitable building in the long-term or even afford to build their own and thereafter. If the community was successful it might even take a succession of buildings to accommodate its expanding congregation.

Today many Jewish communities in England are in decline, especially in areas outside London and Manchester, so sadly some of the work of plotting synagogue history will involve declining communities and redundant and 'lost' synagogues.

## The Research Process

### Quality of Research

If you are to embark on writing a synagogue history it is important to bear in mind some guiding principles. Always endeavour to complete as much research as you can manage and try to go through as many of the written sources as you can, so that you can get as complete picture as possible. There is always the danger that the file or document that you did not read, might contain

crucial information that could change everything. Ideally, you should aim to find a *contemporary documentary source* for particular points you make; however, while oral history can sometime generalise, it can also provide important insights. If at all possible, try to find an independent second source to back up anything that you have been told. It is also important, where possible, to show people what sources you have used, as it will reduce the value of what you say if you do not give some indication of the sources you have used.

It is also vital to be aware that the historical prevalence of synagogue politics and rivalries means that sometimes you may only be told one side of a story. Sometime important things may be deliberately ignored or difficult episodes may be air-brushed out, particularly if there has been a split in the congregation or even a rival congregation formed. For example, while researching an important Anglo-Jewish institution some years ago, the directors of the institutions were quite keen to edit out the importance of their predecessor in ways that might have made Stalin blush!

When you are writing or creating your history, it is always important to be clear about the difference between fact and opinion. If you are speculating or drawing conclusions that could be disputed, either don't include it or be careful to state that is the case. As a historian, I have often found myself making natural assumptions about the history of a community from incomplete evidence, only to have information emerge in later research which has completely invalidated that assumption. In other words: if you don't really know it, don't say it!

### A Model for Research

Every synagogue and its community are unique, and the path of researching each building and community is always going to take different directions. However, over years of researching synagogues at JTrails, we have produced some useful guidelines to start you on the process, though in the nature of these things the guidance cannot be definitive! We are also happy to recommend the model for research recommended by the **Building on History** project. You can find out quite a lot about the history of a synagogue without doing any research in a library or archives, and even without doing much reading. You could follow this initial sequence of activity: **Look – Listen – Read – Research.**

#### Look

A good starting point for any piece of research is to examine the physical environment of the synagogue itself. In some cases, the building might be very familiar to you, but with inquisitive and informed eyes it might inform your understanding of the past in valuable ways. You might want to fully photograph and record as much of the synagogue building, grounds and immediate physical context as possible. If you have a digital camera with a large capacity you should take as many pictures as you can, as it may save you time later. The building itself has its own story to tell through its architecture, decorations, dedications, dedication and memorial books, memorials, furnishings, artefacts, facilities, building phases and even archaeology. This visual historical record is very important but can be over-looked if you become fixed on oral or documentary sources. A careful reading of the building and its context will often supply details of its history that cannot be found

elsewhere and it is important to look at where the building is and what it is surrounded by as well as the building itself.

The furnishings of a synagogue can often be of real interest and in some cases they are very significant as they may have originally come from another older synagogue, as it was not uncommon for furniture and appurtenances from a redundant synagogue to be sold or donated to another synagogue. Memorials might tell you about key members of the synagogue or the activities the community has been involved in.

When you are looking at a synagogue be aware of the additional facilities which would often go with it, which can include minister's housing, religion school rooms or buildings, workshops for the relief of the Jewish poor, Mikvehs (Jewish ritual baths), ritual hand washing facilities, synagogue halls for celebrations and clock towers etc. All of these are interesting and can help tell a story. The help of the warden of the synagogue can be important in understanding the building. For example, what seemed to be a coal cellar at Chatham Synagogue was explained to me as actually being a former ritual bath. The minister's vestibule at Middle Street Synagogue, Brighton, was used for youth clubs and table tennis; while the green house at Sir Moses Montefiore's house used to play a crucial role in providing flowers for one of the festivals!

If there is an accessible cemetery associated with the synagogue it may also be worth investigating. Aspects of communal and synagogue history can be revealed in the cemetery (for example, by recording rabbis, ministers and other officials of the synagogue) and in the case of Dover synagogue, memorial and plaques from earlier synagogues may occasionally be preserved in the cemetery.

### Listen

Where the synagogue is still in use the oral testimony of members of the community can also provide key insights for your research (as well as being an excellent way to involve others and value their memories). In most Jewish communities there are usually one or two people who are the unofficial custodians of the community's heritage and history, and may have very long associations with the building, sometimes over 50 years. This may most often be the Warden of the synagogue, who is traditionally responsible for the care of the building and will often be very proud of the heritage of the building and community. Long-term Presidents of congregations, or rabbis, may well also be key figures to consult, though usually if you contact a synagogue you will often be quickly directed to the local repository of heritage!

If you have a good rapport with the community members you have been in contact with, you might consider capturing some of the information you are being given as an oral history. You can conduct an informal or formal interview with key members of the community and capture the conversation on a digital recorder (guidance on how to do this is given below). However, oral history work is time-consuming and needs to be set up carefully if it is to be successful. Above all else you need to have gained the full trust and agreement of your interviewees. Also, consideration needs to be given to preparing transcriptions of the material – as a general guide it can take four times as long to process an oral history interview as to conduct it.

If you do not have a connection with the synagogue you are researching, it is always worthwhile trying to find someone who can make an introduction for you. You should make sure that you can easily be established as bona fide and also make prior contact before you make a visit as synagogues, as they are often security conscious and wary of the unsolicited caller. I know of at least one synagogue which will not respond to letters addressed to their 'official address' as they use an anonymous PO Box due to security incidents in the past.

Once you are in contact with the right people, they will often be able to give you a very helpful outline of the history of the community and building, which is an excellent starting point. It is important in any research of this kind not to re-invent the wheel, so it is worth finding out if a history of the community has already been published (guidance on how to do this is given below). If a high-quality history has already been published, that will obviously affect what sort of research you will need to do. For example, when **JTrails** were working at the Oxford synagogue there was already an excellent community history that had been produced fairly recently by David Lewis, so it was pointless to repeat already good work. Instead we conducted oral history work to capture more of the war-time experiences and other aspects of the social history of the community before it was gone. This work complemented the existing book and filled in any gaps.

Even where there is no official history of a synagogue, you will often find that short informal histories have been published in the past in synagogue magazines, usually on important dates for the community, such as 50<sup>th</sup>, 75<sup>th</sup>, 100<sup>th</sup> anniversaries. Furthermore, when long-standing officials of the community bow out they often wrote about their times and association with a community. It is also worth looking out for other individual's recollections in such publications – usually along the format of 'so and so looks back' or 'our synagogue 50 years ago'. These recollections and accounts can be invaluable, but you will normally need to check and perhaps add in some ways to the material and narrative that have been presented. Also, it is important not to accept oral testimony uncritically. Beware, for example, of a 'romantic' or selective vision of the past, and also of testimonies that are biased, even inadvertently. There are also important ethical issues to be aware of. Visit this link for more on oral history.

J-Trails has produced resources for oral history, including a tutorial on [conducting oral history interviews](http://www.jtrails.org.uk/get_involved/tutorials/c-257/notes-on-oral-history-recording/) ( [http://www.jtrails.org.uk/get\\_involved/tutorials/c-257/notes-on-oral-history-recording/](http://www.jtrails.org.uk/get_involved/tutorials/c-257/notes-on-oral-history-recording/)) and a list of possible [oral interview questions](http://www.jtrails.org.uk/get_involved/tutorials/c-1141/oral-history-questionnaire/) ([http://www.jtrails.org.uk/get\\_involved/tutorials/c-1141/oral-history-questionnaire/](http://www.jtrails.org.uk/get_involved/tutorials/c-1141/oral-history-questionnaire/))

## Read

**A great deal has already been written about London's synagogues and communities, and background reading can give you an important sense of the wide context of Judaism in London and provide invaluable ideas and leads for research.**

**Two useful web resources are:**

**The Jewish communities and Records UK site** at <http://www.jewishgen.org/JCR-UK/> contains the some 5,000 pages of information on up to 1,200 congregations, including many that no longer exist. For any synagogue history this is an invaluable resource. One very useful part of the web-site is the bibliography, which lists many (but not all) of the publications available on the Jewish communities of a particular places, as well as links to the publications where they are available on-line – a great time and effort saver. It also identifies archives where some of the primary and secondary material can be found. The project is a joint project between the JGSGB and Jewishgen.

**Jewish heritage UK** at [www.jewishheritage.uk](http://www.jewishheritage.uk) is an on-line resource focusing on Anglo-Jewish architectural history and built heritage. The project has undertaken detailed architectural surveys of many historic Jewish building in this country and has a variety of on-line resources as well as publications and would be an excellent starting point for synagogue architectural heritage.

**Jewish Historical Society of England** at <http://www.jhse.org/> is England's premier Jewish historical organisation and its *Transactions* and other publications have been published for over a century and provide an invaluable archive of local and national Jewish history and heritage. The entire out-put of the society has now been digitised and is available as a free and searchable on-line archive to members. Membership of the society is approximately £36 per year and gives a free library card to UCL and the Jewish Studies library which is a vital benefit of membership.

**British History On-line** at <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/Default.aspx> can provide excellent contextual information – both primary and secondary sources - on the history of the area and includes a collection of historic 19<sup>th</sup> century Ordnance Survey maps. Map resources can be of real importance in researching community history.

**The following material might be particularly useful:**

C. Roth, **The Rise of Provincial Jewry** [1950] (available online <http://www.jewishgen.org/JCR-UK/susser/provincialjewry/index.htm> ) provides a valuable account of Jewish communities in the provinces and can be an excellent starting point for research.

M. Roberts, **The Story of England's Jews -The First Thousand Years** (2007) gives an account of England's Jewish history in an accessible, short and convenient form and can be down loaded from [http://www.jtrails.org.uk/whats\\_on/publications](http://www.jtrails.org.uk/whats_on/publications).

D. Renton, **The Lost Synagogues of London** (2004) provides an over-view of many of the lost synagogues in London.

D. Berger, **The Jewish Victorian, 1861 – 1870 (2004) and The Jewish Victorian, 1871 – 1880 (2004)** provide a detailed compilation of biographical data from the Jewish Chronicle, which illuminate community history.

S. Kaddish, *The Synagogues of Britain and Ireland: an Architectural and Social History* (2011) provides important back-ground information and reference material on UK synagogues and how to read the buildings.

S. Kaddish, *Building Jerusalem - Jewish Architecture in Britain* (1996).

J. A. Romain and A. Kershen, *Tradition and Change: A History of Reform Judaism in Britain, 1840-1995* (1995).

L. Rigal and R. Rosenberg, *Liberal Judaism: The First Hundred Year* (2004).

## Research

As you progress onto the research stage of your project you will need to record what you have found and build up your own file or archive on the synagogue. It is useful to be able copy as much information as possible. If you have a good digital camera with a macro lens it is possible to record large amounts of information very easily and at no cost, though you must always ask permission to copy any material and to check what limitations might be placed on your use of the information.

## Archive material

Individual synagogues would make records of their life and activities, and sources such as board and committee minutes, membership ledgers, financial records and cash books, burial society records, synagogue laws and marriage authorisations can provide significant insights for research. Additionally, the archive material of a synagogue might include internal publications, such as newsletters, brochures, magazines and anniversary books.

If you are lucky, you may be directed to the archive of the synagogue you are researching, either in the building, or is now more likely, stored elsewhere. However, it is often the case that there is no significant archive, or just shelves or few boxes of miscellaneous items, as sadly synagogues have often been very remiss with their records. A historian colleague once saw five tons of historic and important synagogue archives being dumped into a skip for disposal and this is not an uncommon story. If you are researching a redundant synagogue, or a lost synagogue, you will need to use largely documentary sources, though if you are dealing with a synagogue which has closed in living memory it is still possible to meet people who remember the synagogue, even many years back. On this see the 'Listen' section above.

The deposited archives of individual London synagogues are often held in the London Metropolitan Archive. Additionally the Leo Baeck College archive includes holdings relating to individual synagogues, including programmes of anniversary celebrations, liturgical material and newsletters.

There are excellent search engines for finding such material, such as [A2A](#) (Access to Archives), a portal to the on-line catalogue and resources of over 400 archives (increasingly detailed summaries or digital copies of the holding are appearing on this site, making it an invaluable resource). Also useful is the [National Register of Archives](#) search engine.

## **Newspapers**

- **The *Jewish Chronicle*** at <http://www.thejc.com/> is an important resource for synagogue and community history spanning over 169 years since 1841. Until relatively recent years, very detailed accounts of local Jewish community events and personalities were covered by the journalists of the paper. The *Chronicle* would almost inevitably carry detailed stories on the opening of new synagogues and so for the 19<sup>th</sup> century in particular you find very detailed descriptions of the foundations of new buildings and opening festivities, but also architectural descriptions as well. On-line searches can be carried out, though you either need to be a subscriber to the paper or pay a per-search fee. The charges are quite high, especially if you are not a subscriber. However, a complete microfilm copy of the JC archive can also be accessed at Jewish Studies Section at University College London Library (see below). Access can be obtained with membership of the Jewish Historical Society of England.
- Local newspapers can be a good source of material on synagogue history as the provincial papers often carried extensive articles on the opening of new synagogues or on Jewish weddings. Reports on weddings would often give detailed accounts of the building. Newspapers would also delight in reporting disputes involving the Jewish community as synagogue disputes could sometimes lead to public disorder and law suits. Local newspapers can be found at the [British Newspaper Library](http://www.bl.uk/reshelp/inrooms/blnewspapers/newsrr.html) at Colindale (<http://www.bl.uk/reshelp/inrooms/blnewspapers/newsrr.html>).

## **Other sources**

- **The Jewish Year Book** has been published annually since 1896 and is an important resource for synagogue history as it gives basic facts about each synagogue, its address, officers, congregational numbers, births, deaths and marriages, charities and societies. The annual entries, if tracked through the years, can give important information about the history of each synagogue, though the numbers given for membership may be only more or less accurate, depending on whether they were taken from official or unofficial figures.
- **The 1851 Religious Census** is a useful document as it gives a snap shot of Jewish religious life and places of worship in 1851 and can be accessed at the National Archives at Kew.
- **The Jewish Genealogical Society of Great Britain (JGSGB)** <http://www.jgsgb.org.uk/> promotes and encourages the study of Jewish genealogy and also has some excellent historical resources, both online and at its head quarters in London. It's 1851 data base carries the genealogical details of a very large percentage of all Jews in England in 1851.



## ***Libraries and Archives***

**The following archives and libraries contain material relating to synagogue histories and Judaism more generally:**

The **London Metropolitan Archives** (see <http://www.cityoflondon.gov.uk>) are a vital resource for studying London history and a key resource for Jewish archives and records as they also contain archives of many of the major religious movements and Jewish representative bodies, charities and educational bodies, the largest of which is the important archive of the United Synagogues. The archives of the former *Greater London Council* are also held at LMA and include rare architectural plans and photographs of synagogues. The records of the *Jewish Memorial Council* have a lot of information on small provincial communities, so the information is not just London based. A number of these archives need prior written permission before they can be used. Information on Jewish holding at the LMA can be downloaded at [http://www.cityoflondon.gov.uk/NR/rdonlyres/B6A84972-AED5-4335-8FD1-B03A0FC48930/0/LH\\_LMA\\_infono16kevver.pdf](http://www.cityoflondon.gov.uk/NR/rdonlyres/B6A84972-AED5-4335-8FD1-B03A0FC48930/0/LH_LMA_infono16kevver.pdf))

The **Jewish Studies Library, University College London** has physical copies of all of the Transactions of the Jewish Historical Society of England, the micro-fiche copy of the Jewish Chronicle, a library of Anglo-Jewish history covering many individual communities, as well as many other publications, reports and ephemera of other synagogue and community organisations. It also holds the Joseph Tuck collection of synagogue silver.

The **Bancroft Road Library** (address: The Local History and Archives Library, at 277 Bancroft Road, Tower Hamlets, E1 4DQ, Tel. 020 7364 1290) is an important resource for any study of East End Jewish history and its synagogues with considerable primary resources, maps and photographs.

The **[Leo Baeck College Library](#)** contains records relating to the institution as well as a collection of sermons of leading figures in Liberal Judaism and the London Bet Din library (most of these books belonged to the first formally recognised Chief Rabbi of England, Solomon Hirschel (1762-1845)).

The **[Parkes Library](#)** at the University of Southampton has a major collection of Jewish material, including papers of Anglo-Jewish leaders and those of significant institutions, such as the Anglo-Jewish Association, the Board of Guardians for the Relief of the Jewish Poor and the London Board of Shechita. There is also a large collection of printed books.

## **Recommended Resources and Tools**

**Google Earth** is a valuable resource as its online satellite images are a flexible tool for the historian, landscape historians and archaeologists. It is easy to over-lay historical map images on to the present day satellite images; so, for example, if you are looking for a lost synagogue which is shown on an older map, an over-lay of the map, with easy to perform corrections for topographical distortions, can rapidly reveal the site of lost buildings in the current landscape and the measuring tools mean that it is easy to measure buildings and sites. Google Earth is also available on Android phones and it is therefore possible to mesh research findings on Google Earth with live GPS positioning on your phone, so that you will be able to know when you are out-side of the front door of a lost synagogue!

**Google Sketch Up** can be used in conjunction with **Google Earth** and it is possible with some practice to use the tool with architectural drawing / maps to create models of previous or lost buildings.

## Publishing Your Synagogue History

Ideally, any history, if well written, should be published and shared with a larger audience so that the findings can be retained for posterity and help other historians develop their understanding of the historic Anglo-Jewish community. It is important to emphasise that there are inexpensive ways of publishing material if you are able to prepare and edit your text and prepare art-work for the text, either by yourself or with the help of others. If you wish to self publish and you can take 'camera ready' copy in the form of a PDF to a printer, it is possible to print large numbers of a short history at a low unit price once the basic print set up has been paid for – even a regular book may well come in at a unit price of little more than a pound.

If you want to publish your text electronically you could set up your own web-site and rent a domain for the web-site at a modest cost each year (and indeed some domains can be provided free of charge) and create web-pages using templates to be found on standard word processing packages.

You can also publish completely free of charge if you are happy to share your material. For example, **JTrails.org.uk** regularly showcases the work of historians on its site.

The digital story format and similar formats can be an exciting way to present your material and may well appeal to media savvy students who want an up-to-date way of sharing their work. It is particularly important that historical research should be accessible and relevant to a younger audience. Digital stories are particularly useful to play as a loop on a computer monitor as part of a display.

It can also be relatively cheap to present your own exhibition – if you can prepare your own text and artwork in a PDF, in a camera ready form the work can be printed on a larger format – either paper based, or on a stiff mount at a relatively cheap price. Paper based display panels can be laminated and backed with Velcro mounts, which enable the display to be mounted very easily in fabric display boards and will be durable and attractive. A basic exhibition in this form can be mounted for between £100 and £250.

The **JTrails** model of wider engagement uses community based synagogue history projects as an opportunity to build both relationships within a particular community and reach out-side to the wider community. The launch of an exhibition on the history of a synagogue can be a good way to help others know more about your community. You may find that if other communities have seen what you have done they may well ask your advice on doing the same for their own community. This can create good relationships between faith group members.

## Appendix: Recommended Resources

**JTrails** [www.JTrails.org.uk](http://www.JTrails.org.uk) has completed a study and survey of the history and heritage of over twenty Jewish communities and their synagogues, up and down the country - a valuable historical and heritage guide. The site also has a number of useful and free historical resources on line. This includes free and down-loadable history of Anglo-Jewry, '**The Story of England's Jews**', which also comes with a **self-study pack and tutorial**, if you wish to make a systematic, but efficient study of the history of Jews in this country. The book is down-loadable at [http://www.jtrails.org.uk/whats\\_on/publications](http://www.jtrails.org.uk/whats_on/publications) and the self-study pack is at [http://www.jtrails.org.uk/get\\_involved/tutorials/c-691/jtrails-self-study-pack-the-story-of-englands-jews/](http://www.jtrails.org.uk/get_involved/tutorials/c-691/jtrails-self-study-pack-the-story-of-englands-jews/) A tutorial on **conducting oral history interviews** is free to down load at [http://www.jtrails.org.uk/get\\_involved/tutorials/c-257/notes-on-oral-history-recording/](http://www.jtrails.org.uk/get_involved/tutorials/c-257/notes-on-oral-history-recording/) and a list of possible **oral interview questions** is also provided at [http://www.jtrails.org.uk/get\\_involved/tutorials/c-1141/oral-history-questionnaire/](http://www.jtrails.org.uk/get_involved/tutorials/c-1141/oral-history-questionnaire/) The web-site also has **project plans for helping students** organise their Jewish heritage topic or project work, which is at <http://www.jtrails.org.uk/schools/student-area>