



*Manchester Jewish Museum, Cheetham Hill Road.*

## MANCHESTER JEWISH MUSEUM

**Catharine Rew**

**Manchester Jewish Museum is housed in the former Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue on Cheetham Hill Road. Built in 1874 this is now the oldest surviving synagogue building in Manchester and a particularly appropriate setting for a museum which records the history of Manchester's Jewish community as well as acting more generally as an introduction to Judaism and the Jewish way of life.**

The museum itself was opened in 1984 after many years of effort by an energetic and determined group of people who believed a museum was necessary and possible and were not daunted by the problems they encountered on the way.

The museum's origins lie in a committee formed in 1969 by three men, Leonard Cohen, Walter Wolfson and Hymie Goldman, who came together to organise the writing of a history of Manchester Jewry. They were not historians themselves and they recognised the need to find someone who would research and write academically but who would also be sensitive to the varied experience within an immigrant community. The person they approached was Bill Williams, then Principal Lecturer at Manchester Polytechnic (now Museum

Life President and Historian). In researching the book, published by Manchester University Press in 1976 as *The Making of Manchester Jewry 1740-1875*, he and the rest of the committee realised how many of the tangible records of the community's past were disappearing, and how little concern was felt for this state of affairs by most Anglo-Jewish historians and by most members



*Neville Laski, and his wife, Sissie, and daughter, Marghanita.*

of the community itself. Some measures could be taken and contact was made early on with the City Archivist so that institutional records and personal papers at least could be passed into safe keeping (that is if they were rescued in time - one synagogue's records were left to be disposed of among the debris of the demolished building). A longer term strategy was needed to preserve the record of the community's day to day life at home, work and leisure, a growing area of concern to historians all over the country who like Bill Williams were associated with the History Workshop movement. The creation of a Jewish History Unit at Manchester Polytechnic in 1974 was an important first step. This became part of the Manchester Studies Unit which with a wider remit was, under Bill Williams' leadership, an active and radical base for research using local oral history, documentary photography and film, as well as more traditional written records, until the mid-1980s.

The Jewish History Unit uncovered a wealth of material particularly about the lives of immigrants and children of immigrants from the turn of the century. The memories could be taped and the photographs copied but it became increasingly obvious that the story of the

community would be more widely known and be made more permanently available to all in a museum. Then there would be space for objects, maps and reconstructions in addition to the tapes and photographs and there could be facilities for events and education programmes. An attempt had been made to save the Great Synagogue on Cheetham Hill Road for such a purpose when its officials decided in 1974 to move nearer to its congregation's new homes. Cheetham Hill Road was, in the decades at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, the bustling central thoroughfare of the main Jewish quarter in Manchester and the Great Synagogue was a focal point of that quarter. However the idea of it becoming a museum was not taken up. Once the Great Synagogue was left it was quickly stripped and vandalised and eventually, after acting as a visible warning of what *not* to do with old buildings, it had to be demolished in 1987.

When, in 1978, the executive of the Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue, the last working synagogue on Cheetham Hill Road, was forced to make the same decision to move, steps were taken at an early stage to discuss the possibility of using the building as a museum. A new committee - the Jewish Heritage Committee - was set up which included Bill Williams and Werner Mayer who was an executive member of the Spanish and Portuguese Congregation, but also a deputy head who was enthusiastic about



*Striking waterproof garment workers in 1936.*

the educational role of a museum. Their idea was publicised but there was still very little support from the community. In fact a local Jewish paper said the community needed a museum like it needed a ham sandwich.

The committee, soon to become the Jewish Museum Trust, was undeterred. Once permission was given and the building finally purchased in 1982, they turned their attention to fundraising and architect's plans. Drawing on the experience of what happened to the Great Synagogue it was arranged that builders

should move in as soon as the congregation moved out and work should begin on the restoration.

The synagogue was in a bad state of repair and the aim was to bring it back to its original splendour. It had been built by a group of Sephardi Jewish immigrants who were in Manchester because of their connection with the overseas trade in cotton textiles. The Sephardim are Jews whose ancestors lived in Spain and Portugal. They were expelled from those countries at the end of the fifteenth century. Many Sephardi Jews settled in



*Wolfe and Sarah Kay and their children, 1919. Wolfe worked as a plumber at Clayton Aniline Dye Co.*



Sidney Rich on his Bar Mitzvah c. 1935.

countries around the Mediterranean, and early founders of Manchester's Spanish and Portuguese Synagogue were from Gibraltar, Corfu and North Africa. By the late 1860s there were about 30 Sephardi families living in the Cheetham Hill area and leading members of that group decided that with such numbers it was feasible to build their own synagogue in which they could worship in their own tradition. This tradition had (and has) certain differences from that of the Ashkenazi Jews who originated in Central and Eastern Europe and who made up the majority of Manchester's Jewish population. They appointed the Manchester Jewish architect, Edward Salamons, who chose a Hispano-Moresque style to reflect the congregation's distant origins in Muslim Spain. He designed an ornate and richly decorated building which could seat 200 men on the ground floor and 100 women in the ladies gallery above. An advantage for its later use as a museum was the positioning of the Reading Desk at the back of the main synagogue hall, instead of in the centre as is usual in Ashkenazi synagogues. This leaves an open space between the desk and the Ark, the cupboard on the eastern wall where the scrolls are kept. Since the museum opened this open space has been used for a wide variety of events.

The last service was held in May 1982 and the congregation moved to smaller

premises in Kersal, Salford. Between 1982 and 1984 the building was restored with public and private funding. Staff were employed from 1982 through the Government-funded Community Programme Schemes to seek out, document, research and photograph collections, to organise events and education programmes and to design posters, worksheets and temporary exhibitions. There was a surge of activity and much was achieved. The disadvantage of such schemes was that in six years over 50 people were employed on short-term contracts and there was no continuity. However it was fortunate that a number of energetic and committed individuals, many of whom went on to other jobs in museums or similar institutions, were involved in these early stages. It was also fortunate that Bill Williams, as Chairman of the Trustees, was available to guide and coordinate activities, and that Rickie Burman, who was a key member of the Jewish History Unit and went on to play a critical role in the setting up of the London Museum of

Jewish life, was taken on for six months by the Trustees to research sources of funding. Above all it was fortunate that so many people worked as volunteers, particularly to keep the shop open and a guiding system operating. Manchester Jewish Museum continued to use Community Programme staff on a large number of different schemes until 1988 when the Government ended that employment system. In fact the staffing situation had started to change in the previous year when Werner Mayer took over from Bill Williams as Chairman and the Trustees appointed a Curator, Catharine Rew, to manage the museum and its collections. When the Community Programme finished the decision was taken to retain Don Rainger, the last Community Programme Supervisor, as Administrator.

The active collecting of objects, documents and photographs had started as soon as the museum became a reality. There was already a collection of over 300 taped interviews with local Jewish

# ועד השחיטה במנשטער

# שמר יינגע אזהרה

פד האבט שוין אריינע סארט מוזדד-טעות דאס

## קייז פאולטרי דיעלער זאל זיך

## ניכט וואגען צו געהן שבת אין

## מארקעט צו קויפען פאולטרי

ליידער איזט אונזער אזהרה ביז יעצט ניכט פרמידלעם נטוארען, אלא זיינען פד שטייע מוזדד ופדיע נאך א סארט, און דאס לעצטע סארט, דאס פון היינט אן זאל זיך קייז פאולטרי דיעלער ניכט וואגען דינעס צו טוהן, דיא כאארד האט אריינגע צו האבן איין אריינפער אין מארקעט יעדן שבת, אונד ווען סאך וויד אריינשטעלען דאס איין פאולטרי דיעלער ווירד געהן אלץ אדער שיקע יצאנד אין מארקעט שבת צו קויפען פאולטרי, וויד זיין לייסענס זאמארס צונושומען ווערדען אונד זיינע עזופות וויד ע'פ דיז תורה געמארט ווערדען ביא אונד בית דיז הדים, אונד דער איסור וויד פובליצירט ווערדען. ועל זה באנו על הקיום וזם נ' תשעה באב תרס"ט פה מנשטער.

נאום פנחם דובער ראנוספיקי. ונאום ישראל יעקב הכהן יפה. ונאום צבי הירש לעווין.

### WARNING TO POULTRY DEALERS

Any negligence on the part of a Poultry Dealer in the fulfilment of the above Notice, which according to the decision of the Ecclesiastical Authorities, affects the right of selling Kosher Poultry, will lead to the suspension of his Licence by the Board, which is determined to strictly adopt this course in the future.

By order, E. TROTZKEY, Secretary and Investigating Officer.

J. MASSEL & SON, "The Sheetham Press," MANCHESTER.

Manchester Shechitah Authority. Strict Warning to poultry dealers visiting the market on the Sabbath.

people at Manchester Studies as well as a large collection of copied family photographs of members of the Jewish community. These, or in the case of the photographs, copies of the copies, were transferred to the new museum. The aim was to collect items from all sections of the community, and to illustrate all aspects of life however humdrum. An important consideration from the early stages of envisaging a museum had been that it should be a means of dispelling misconceptions about Jewish people and, by implication, about other minority groups. This was not to be done overtly or didactically but would be implicit in the choice of nonstereotypical images and by the emphasis on the wide variety of experience of Jewish people in Manchester, particularly the lives of working people. And this emphasis is the basis for the collecting policy now. So cooking pots are collected as well as prayer books and trade union membership cards as well as illuminated addresses.

The museum opened to the public in 1984. The permanent exhibition on the history of the Jews in Manchester which, with the assistance of the North West Museums Service, was fitted with great ingenuity into the former ladies gallery upstairs opened in 1985, as did the temporary exhibition area in the 'Succah', a communal meeting room built in 1921



*Bessie Cohen, joined John Tiller's dance troupe and became a "Tiller girl".*

behind the main hall. Downstairs the synagogue has been restored to look very much like it did when it was first built and it gives many visitors their first experience of a Jewish place of worship or perhaps of any place of worship other than that of their own tradition. It is a starting point for discussion for many of the school, college and adult groups who visit. A scroll is shown under perspex on the Reading Desk, there is a folder of information on the lectern, a caption on the contents of the Ark and a display case of religious items, but it is left up to individual visitors to find out as much as they choose about religious custom and practice. A volunteer guide is available to answer questions and there is a well stocked, though small, bookshop.

Upstairs the gallery is divided into alcoves naturally created by the supporting beams of the roof. Each section represents a theme, a phase or an episode from Manchester's Jewish history.

There are reconstructions of a back parlour in Red Bank in the 1890s with a table set for the Sabbath, of an office in Manchester's former Zionist Association and of a workbench belonging to a waterproof garment maker of the 1930s. The past is evoked through photographs,

documents and objects and by the voices of Jewish immigrants which can be heard at four points around the gallery on telephone handsets.

With such limited display space but such extensive collections the temporary exhibition area has been invaluable. There it has been possible to cover in more detail aspects of Jewish life only touched on in the upstairs gallery. These have included the so-called 'immigrant trades', synagogues, festivals, entertainment and leisure, food and the experience of refugees from Nazi Germany and Austria.

It is also possible to expand on the permanent displays through educational activities and through special events. About 60 per cent of the museum's visitors come in groups. These are of all ages and are from schools and colleges and from church, local history and other leisure associations. Most come during the day but evening visits are also catered for and everyone is offered an introductory talk. Subjects requested may be a basic introduction to Judaism, a discussion of the Passover or other Jewish festivals, a history of the Jewish community in the area or a survivor's experience of the Holocaust.

## THE EVENT OF THE SEASON

in aid of the

### 'Morris Laski' Memorial Orphan Fund of the Manchester Jewish Orphan Aid Society

The  
GREAT SYNAGOGUE LITERARY AND SOCIAL SOCIETY  
DRAMATIC SECTION

(Winners for the 3rd time of the Jewish Drama Festival Shield)

WILL PRESENT

For the First Time on any Stage

A Great New Modern Play in Three Acts.

# "Beneath the Skin"

By EMMANUEL LEVY the well-known Manchester Artist

at the LESSER FREE TRADE HALL, Peter Street,

on Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday and Saturday,  
December 11th, 12th, 13th, 14th and 16th.

Curtain rises promptly at 7.30 p.m. : : : Prices 1/- to 5/-

Seats may be booked in advance at

14, BLACKFRIARS STREET, DEANSGATE

(Hon. Organiser, Mr. L. Kay) - - - Phone BLA 4444.

Tickets also obtainable at the Offices of the

"JEWISH GAZETTE," 97, Cheetam Hill Rd.

and on Sunday Morning at Frankenburg House, 484 Cheetam Hill Rd

'PATRONS' for a fee of 1 Guinea are entitled to Four Special Seats

'SUBSCRIBERS' for Ten Shillings, to Two

## A GOOD SHOW for a GOOD CAUSE

*Advert for "Beneath the Skin" play at the Lesser Free Trade Hall.*



Bill Williams leading Museum Heritage Trail, 1991 outside the former New Synagogue on Cheetham Hill Road.

Evening or Sunday events give individual visitors a chance to learn more about particular aspects of the museum. During the eight years since the museum opened there has been a wide variety of demonstrations, concerts, talks and plays. A regular feature has been the monthly guided walks by Bill Williams round what remains of the old Jewish quarter. Then there have been events connected with specific temporary exhibitions such as the various cookery demonstrations which accompanied 'The Melting Pot', an exhibition of Jewish food, and events connected with a particular time of year such as the demonstration Seder meals. There have been demonstrations of challah plaiting by a Jewish baker, reconstructions of Jewish weddings, memory recall sessions and the premiere by a professional theatre company of *The Golem*.

Some visitors are looking for more detailed information and many researchers use the museum's collections,

particularly the oral history interviews, but also the folders of around 18,000 photographic images and the extensive collection of pamphlets. Between 1989 and 1991 we were fortunate to get funding from the Association of Greater Manchester Authorities for two people to work specifically on the organisation of the collections, including the computerisation of records and this improved their documentation and general storage conditions. Some documents, pamphlets and original photographs are stored at the Greater Manchester County Record Office though institutional records are still passed to the Manchester City Archives Department. Researchers are welcome but need to arrange a visit or series of visits in advance as space and staff availability are limited.

In conclusion, the Manchester region has an increasing number of museums but most of these reflect aspects of the mainstream community. Manchester Jewish Museum complements this by

offering an insight into the experience of an immigrant minority, an experience which has many parallels with that of more recent immigrant groups.

Further information, including a calendar of events, is available from **Manchester Jewish Museum, 190 Cheetham Hill Road, Manchester, M8 8LW. (Telephone 061-834-9879.)** Opening hours are Monday-Thursday 10.30-4.00, Sunday 10.30-5.00.

There is a small admission charge. Groups must be booked in advance with the Administrator. The museum is closed for Jewish holidays.

#### FURTHER READING

Bill Williams *The Making of Manchester Jewry 1740-1875*, Manchester University press, 1976.

Bill Williams *Manchester Jewry A Pictorial History 1788-1988*, Archive Publications, 1988.