

The Jews of England 1066 to 1290

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Part 3 – Mixed Fortunes

Jewish scholarship and religious life grew steadily from the beginning of settlement in England. There are records of many synagogues around the country as well as religious and financial leaders.



Depiction of a Jew in Winchester Cathedral

Under William II, Lombard Hall, Moses Hall and Jacob Hall in Oxford, existed as Jewish lodgings and colleges of tuition. Rabbis even taught Christian students in their synagogues. Jewish settlement was sometimes restricted to the “Jewry”; one or a few streets. Later, Jews could not reside in a town without an Archa, established by the “Ordinances of the Jewry” in 1194, and named after the registry chest where significant documents were stored.

The most prominent synagogue, the *Magna scola*, situated close to the Tower of London, was built by Rabbi Josce of Rouen in the early 13th century. It was likely modelled upon the synagogue in his home town, the remains of which are still visible under the Palais de Justice. While synagogues and mikvaot were widespread, for over a century, the only dedicated Jewish cemetery in England was outside London’s walls at Cripplegate (now the Barbican). In 1177, Henry II granted Jews the right to purchase burial grounds beyond the walls of the cities where they lived. This was no avail to Benedict of York (d 1189), a prominent moneylender, who was forcibly baptised and recanted. Neither the Archbishop of Canterbury nor the Jews would inter him in their consecrated ground.

In the early period religious questions were referred back to rabbis in France and Europe. Eventually England became an acknowledged place of learning and a destination of established sages. Abraham Ibn Ezra (1089 - 1167) spent time in London and remarked on the disparity between the affluent and impoverished coreligionists. Jacob of Orleans and Rabbi YomTov of Joigny, were students of Rashi’s grandson, Rabbenu Tam. Tragically, Rabbi Jacob was murdered in the massacres in London around the coronation of Richard I in 1189.

Rabbi YomTov, who authored the Kol Nidrei piyut "Omnam Keyn" perished in massacre of Jews in York in 1190.

As long as order was kept, funds raised, and taxes paid, many Jewish communities enjoyed qualified autonomy. Henry II and John both allowed synagogue councils to resolve domestic disputes and pass regulations. Under Henry III (1207 - 1272) they were able to excommunicate those who didn't meet their contributions to the Chevra Kadisha. After 40 days, an excommunicant's property was forfeit to the Crown.

It is clear from ketubot and other archives that many Jewish women were well educated and transacted business. Some were so prominent, or their wealth so significant, they drew the attention of the King. Licoricia of Winchester prospered as a moneylender using her inheritance from her first husband. In 1242, she wanted to marry David of Oxford, who was still married to Muriel. Even the King and Archbishop of York were drawn into divorce proceedings with English and French Batei Din. They married in 1242. David died in 1244. The chests containing his bonds were sealed and taken to the Exchequer of the Jews to be assessed. Licoricia was imprisoned in the Tower of London to prevent her interference. She had to pay 5000 Marks to repurchase his debts.

Belia, widow of Petitevin of Bedford, inherited and ran his loan business. In 1261, after her brothers moved into town and tried to take over, Belia successfully took out letters patent to exclude them from Bedford for five years. In 1258, Licoricia was again in the Tower, falsely accused of stealing a ring that Belia was sending to King Henry. She was released when her accuser was found to be the guilty party. Licoricia returned to business but was murdered in 1277. Successful Jews sometimes had powerful friends but always had jealous enemies.