

The Jews of England 1066 to 1290

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Part 8 – Effectively Cut Out



Edward 1 Penny

By the time that Edward I acceded to the throne in 1272, even the richest of England's Jews were feeling the pinch. The wealthiest communities and individuals had been targeted by tallages. Tuscan and Lombard merchants provided moneylending services which the church accepted, or at least preferred to Jews. Within Europe, Jews were becoming increasingly vilified by the church. Blood libels and accusations of desecrating the host were manifestations of this. From another side, wealthy Jews became the image of evil of the emerging religious orders such as the Blackfriars, Franciscans and Greyfriars which promoted poverty as a virtue.

Edward, more rigorous and pious than John or Henry III before him, saw little advantage in affording his Jews his protection. As he made clear, in the 1275 Statutes of the Jewry, reliance on Jewish moneylending was a religious embarrassment.

“Albeit he and his ancestors have received much benefit from the Jewish people in all-time past; nevertheless, for the honour of God and the common benefit of the people, the King hath ordained and established, that from henceforth no Jew shall lend anything at usury...”

Edward's influence preceded his accession. Already in 1269, Jews required a special licence to dispose of property they held. In 1271, he instigated laws restricting Jewish financial activity. In 1275, now King, he passed the Statutes of the Jewry forbidding Jewish moneylending in every form. The new measures required all Jews from the age of seven and above to wear the tabula. All Jews over 12 had to pay 3d towards the funding of the Domus Conversorum and the protection of baptised converts. He further limited Jewish access to the courts and imposed hefty tallages, imprisoning those unable to pay and deporting their families.

In 1272 Pope Gregory X had rejected allegations of ritual murder and insisted there should be no more forced conversions. However, in 1278, Edward gave his support to a papal bull issued by Nicholas III that Jews should be forced to attend Dominican services facilitating conversion. A sincere believer, Edward allowed converts to keep one third of their possessions and relinquished some of his personal income from the Jewish community in order to support those who were baptised.

In 1286, Pope Honorius IV wrote a letter to the archbishops of Canterbury and York that “we have heard that in England the accused and perfidious Jews have done unspeakable things in horrible acts, to the shame of our Creator and the detriment of the Catholic faith.” Shaming and disgrace became a motif of punishment. Sampson, son of Samuel of Northampton sentenced to parade naked through five major cities carrying the entrails of a calf.

A common charge against the Jewish community was coin-clipping, a widespread practice, whereby silver shavings were taken from the edge of coins and melted down to forge new currency. Whether the Jews clipped coins through desperation to pay the tallages or through sheer criminality, some were most certainly guilty. Their activities are condemned by the Rabbi Meir of Rothenburg (1215-73) in his Responsa. The contemporary chronicler Matthew Paris railed against “coins being circumcised”. According to John of Oxnead, “all the Jews of England, whatever their status, age or sex were suddenly seized and imprisoned in various Castles throughout England with specially appointed guards.” On 17th November 1279, 600 Jews were arrested for coin-clipping and sent to the Tower. As many as 300 were hanged with heavy fines and property seizures imposed on the remainder.

Gradually, the dwindling Jewish communities of England found themselves with no means of support. Useless, their erstwhile friends at court abandoned them. They had no one to turn to and nowhere to go.