

THE JEWS OF PLYMOUTH

An Illustrated History

Helen Fry

This book is the first fully illustrated history of the Jews of Plymouth, a history in which the community has made a long and distinguished contribution to the city's naval and civic life.

The present-day community traces its roots to the 1720s and Plymouth Synagogue, a Grade II listed building, is significant because, not only is it the oldest synagogue outside London, but the oldest Ashkenazi synagogue in the English-speaking world. Its exquisitely beautiful interior has seen continuous worship for over 250 years since it was first built in 1762.

The congregation's oldest cemetery lies on the historic Hoe, with the first recorded burial in 1744. It is here that the founder members of the community are buried: amongst them Joseph and Sarah Sherrenbeck, Abraham Joseph I and the Hart brothers.

The naval connection, which goes back to Elizabethan times and Sir Francis Drake, ran deepest from the 1700s until the Second World War. Jewish pedlars were granted permission to board the ships docked in the port and sold all kinds of goods to the sailors. Their main trade was in sailors' clothes or 'slops' which gave rise to the term 'slopmen'. Figures like Abraham Joseph enjoyed the favour of royalty and was appointed slopman to HRH Prince William Henry.

By the end of the nineteenth century, Plymouth and Devonport's Jews entered local politics. Their contribution is unparalleled in other provincial Jewish communities of this period. Many served on the various Council committees or as Councillors of Wards. Myer Fredman became the first Jewish Mayor of Devonport and Arthur Goldberg elected the first Jewish Lord Mayor of Plymouth.

During both World Wars, the Jews of Plymouth played their part in the British armed forces, with a number being killed in action. The first civilian casualties of the intense German bombing of the city in WW2 were Mary Smith and her niece, Esta, both members of the synagogue.

Over the centuries, Plymouth has seen its share of famous Jewish artists, among them Abraham Daniel (the miniaturist), Solomon Hart (first Jew admitted to the Royal Academy), and Robert Lenkiewicz whose art courted controversy in the 20th century.

For generations, the Jews of Plymouth found a safe haven from the pogroms of Europe, a city where they could settle and prosper without any fear of intolerance or religious persecution. This is their extraordinarily diverse and rich story.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

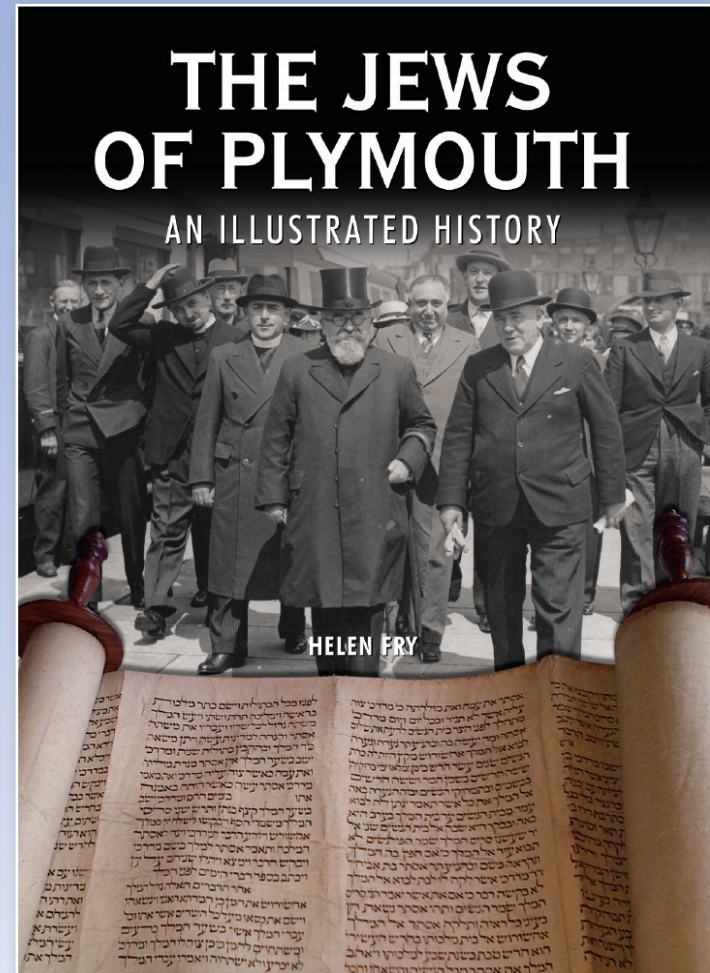


Helen Fry has written widely on the history of Anglo-Jewry, with particular reference to the Jews of Devon and Cornwall, including *Jews in North Devon during the Second World War* and *The Jews of Exeter*. She also specialises in WW2, primarily writing about the refugees from Nazism who fought for Britain. Her WW2 books include *Churchill's Secret Soldiers*, *The M Room: Secret Listeners who Bugged the Nazis*, *Freuds' War*, *Spymaster: The Secret Life of Kendrick* and *Inside Nuremberg Prison*. Helen has featured in a number of documentaries for Channel 4, ITV and Channel 5, as well as live interviews on the BBC and various radio stations. She is a member of the Biographers Club. Official website: www.helen-fry.com

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Scroll of Esther once belonging to the Lopes family



Wedding of Hilda Black to Sam Marks, 1946, outside Plymouth Synagogue

Example of a double-page spread.



The old cemetery, The Hoe

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Born Port Elizabeth, Port Alfred, East London and Natal, and St Helena. The Royal Mail Service operated to the Cape of Good Hope, Natal and East Africa. It was again, this strong racial background that many local Jews prospered and gained an exceptional track record for fairness.

The links of Jews and the Navy in Plymouth continued for several generations. From the port of Plymouth sailed Sir Alexander Schomburgk (1726-1804), son of Mayer Schomburgk, physician to the Great Synagogue in London. Schomburgk commanded the frigate *Dana* at the capture of Quebec in 1759/60. Midshipman Benjamin De Costa

bought aboard HMS *Tonnant* at the Battle of Trafalgar in 1805 and Abraham Barnett served aboard HMS *Vanguard* at the Battle of the Nile in 1798. One of the first names on the Naval Memorial on the Hoe is that of Midshipman V. Schreiber who was down with the crew of HMS *Albatross* at the Battle of Coronel in November 1914. Also Jack Silverstone of Devonport who was lost at sea during WW1. Plymouth became a thriving, vibrant city in which its Jewish community settled with no fear of discrimination or religious intolerance. It is an incredibly rich history, and one which this book seeks to shed light on.

CHAPTER 1 FOUNDATION OF THE COMMUNITY 1720s-1800

IN THE EARLY 1700s, economic and trading opportunities brought Jews to Plymouth from Alsace, Rhineland and Bohemia. Others who settled in the city were Ashkenazi Jews who had fled the pogroms of Europe and the War of the Austrian Succession of 1740 in which Emperor Maria Theresa disallowed to expel all Jews from Moravia and Bohemia. General Europe at that time was a patchwork of uncooperating pieces for Jews to locate into kingdoms and dukedoms, the Jews in these lands were at the mercy of change of the monarchs and leaders and their changing moods and religious bigotry. The European Renaissance had essentially ostracized the Jew to the ghetto, with every kind of repression heaped upon them. The tenacity and realism of Jewish philosophy and identity kept them alive and normally, Jew-oriented from those from a virtually the only body of people possessed of general education, able to read, write and do accounting. They found themselves in key places of influence, often as advisors to a ruler or government. Some looked to the New World beyond the sea where they could begin a new life, sometimes as far afield as the West Indies. Many did not make the full journey and disembarked halfway at the English ports. The colonial trade, which places like Plymouth offered, attracted many to stay. In Plymouth, they found a haven and were courteously and fairly received by the townfolk. Most of those Jewish settlers lived in and around Southwick Street. They found a city of tolerance that had once welcomed the religious rebels, the Puritans. Other Christian denominations found a fruitful proselyting ground in Plymouth, for example, William the Galician and Methodist preachers John and Charles Wesley. In this milieu of religious tolerance, the Jews established a new life which marked an end to their persecution.

The first written record of Jews in the city occurs in *A Picture of Plymouth*, published in 1812, which mentions nine Jewish silversmiths in Plymouth, Dock and Southhouse. A later printed source says that 'about the year 1740, several Hebrew families settled in the town, and formed a congregation in Broad How Lane.' Amongst the

first settlers were Joseph Jacob Sternbeck and his wife Sarah who came to the city around 1748, originally from Sternbeck in Germany. Joseph Jacob Sternbeck is first heard of in 1754 at the Assize at Tainon where he was found guilty of criminal conversation with the wife of Esauas Chabock, for which he was fined £20 and imprisoned for 2 years. A short notice in the Plymouth *synagogue* bearing an inscription about Joseph was given to the present Hebrew Congregation and read: *His partner belong to Joseph ben Judah Jacob from Sternbeck. PPH Plymouth in the year 5565 (1745).* The initials PPH probably stand for 'Penny Halber' i.e. President of the Congregation. Joseph Sternbeck was a prominent business man and generous benefactor to the synagogue who died sometime between 1779



Mary Schomburgk



Remains of Joseph Jacob Sternbeck, the old cemetery

¹ R. M. Worth, *A History of Plymouth*, 1880, 2nd ed., p. 11.

Exterior of Plymouth Synagogue



COURTESY: PLYMOUTH JEWISH COMMUNITY