

Jews in Britain

How did the history of Jews in Britain start?

It is a very long history. The first substantial Jewish community arrived in England after the Norman Conquest of 1066, although some historians suggest there was a presence in even earlier times.

So what caused the expulsion?

Resentment of their perceived wealth, exacerbated by the popular belief that they killed Jesus, grew in towns and cities, despite the fact that Jewish communities often lived in poor conditions.

By the 12th century, Jews were being accused of the ritual murder of Christian children, known as "blood libels". As the public mood turned against Jews, Edward I subjected them to a special tax and, according to some sources, considered forcing them to wear yellow patches. Eventually in 1290, the king decided to expel Jews en masse.

So did they leave?

Many fled, fearing for their lives after already witnessing pogroms, or hearing of them elsewhere. One of the worst incidents was the 1190 massacre of Jews in York.

Some converted to Christianity, although in many cases this was largely a façade in order to placate persecutors.

So why is the date 1656 so important?

Jews began returning to England in numbers in the 17th century.

With the age of international trade and European rivalries gathering pace, Jewish bankers and merchants bought competitive advantage.

There was also a religious dimension, with some Protestants believing that the return of Jews was a vital part in the hoped-for return of the Messiah.

The first synagogue opened in 1656, quickly followed by the first Jewish cemetery in London's Mile End.



A menorah, the holy candelabrum that is seen as a symbol of Judaism



Screen showing the alleged murder by Jews of William of Norwich in 1144

How did the community develop?

There are today many different Jewish communities, reflecting different strands of belief across the broad spectrum of Judaism.

The first to arrive were "Marranos" - Sephardi, meaning they were from Spain and Portugal or North Africa.

The other great branch to arrive in England were the Ashkenazi, Jews from Germany and north-east Europe.

The last great group of Jewish communities that arrived in the UK were those fleeing Nazi Europe before and during the Second World War.

So how many Jews are there in Britain?

Some 267,000 people told the 2001 census that they were Jewish, the first time a question on religion had been asked. But this is widely accepted to be a dramatically declining population.

Jews are protected as a race under UK law (as are Sikhs) because their faith is inextricably linked to their ethnicity - Jewish identity is passed from mother to child and conversion to the faith extremely difficult.

This means that marriage within the community is a crucial concern - and many community leaders fear that Judaism will decline further in the UK without greater efforts to ensure its continuation.

Where are the centres of Jewish life in the UK?

Overwhelmingly they are in London.

Barnet in the north-west of London is the unofficial capital with up to 60,000 Jews.

Areas on the northern fringes of London, such as Hertfordshire and parts of Essex are also known for their strong Jewish communities. Beyond London, two key centres are Manchester and Gateshead.

How do Jews fare compared to other minorities?

Very favourably, although they remain a small community, they have had a significant impact in most walks of life. The reasons for this are complex and much debated.

For a start, they are the longest-established religious minority in the UK - many British Jews could probably trace their ancestors back centuries.

This means that many of the challenges faced by new minorities, integration, language issues and acceptance for instance, just do not figure for many Jewish communities.

Many Jewish families are firmly part of the middle class in professions or highly-skilled jobs.

Educationally, Jewish children tend to do well and for more than 100 years many of the leading figures in British society have come from a Jewish background.