

Keith Pearce, “The Penzance Jewish Cemetery: A Concise History and Guide”, Penlee House Gallery and Museum, Morrab Road, Penzance, 2015, ISBN 978-0-9928526-1-0, £4.99 pbk

In reviewing Keith Pearce’s *magnum opus*, *The Jews of Cornwall*, in the February 2015 issue of *An Baner*, Anthony Phillips laid stress on the huge importance of the thirty years of research which had culminated in that book’s publication and described it as ‘magisterial’. Much more modest in both scope and size is this handy guide to Penzance Jewish Cemetery.

In June, I was fortunate enough to be given a guided tour by the author of what he describes as ‘one of the finest examples of the Anglo-Jewish Heritage’ and was amazed to find this architectural gem in the Leskinnick area of Penzance. There are, it seems, about twenty-five extant Georgian Jewish burial grounds dating from the early 18th century in Britain, seven of them in the south-west. Penzance Cemetery is by far the best preserved and Grade II listed.

The first twenty pages of this 26-page booklet are devoted to the history of the cemetery and Keith Pearce describes how Jews first came to Penzance from the Rhineland and Holland in the period 1720 to 1740. A synagogue was not built until 1768, before which worship probably took place in private houses.

Of the forty-nine identified headstones, many of which are still in remarkably good condition, with beautifully carved and elaborate Hebrew inscriptions, the earliest dated one comes from 1791, while the earliest identified headstone is from 1823. Development of the burial ground took place in stages, and with each stage, some form of extended enclosure became necessary. By the mid-1820s, the whole area around the cemetery had become known as the ‘Jews’ Fields’. Leskinnick Terrace, which subsequently became known locally as ‘Jerusalem Row’, was developed two decades later, at which point the Jews succeeded in purchasing the freehold of the cemetery. By the 1890s, though, the congregation was in decline and it ceased to exist in 1906, although a last burial took place five years later.

As well as a potted history of Jews in Penzance, the booklet includes information about some of the more important figures in the development of the cemetery, including Lemon Woolf, President of the Hebrew Congregation; Samuel Oppenheim of Penzance and his wife, Elizabeth Levy of Truro; and Rabbi Asher Simmons, local silversmith and jeweller. Also featured are a modern plan of the cemetery alongside the freehold purchase document of 1844, which shows the plan for the final enclosure of the cemetery walls; a very basic guide to the Jewish religious year and Hebrew dates; and nineteen colour illustrations – including sixteen headstones and portraits of four figures prominent in the congregation.

Keith Pearce has acted as the cemetery’s permanent local custodian since 1997 and no one is better placed to write so authoritatively and so eloquently about one of Penzance’s best-kept secrets.

All proceeds from the sale of this superb booklet will be donated to the Friends of Penzance Jewish Cemetery.

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