

A revival of interest in the finest example of a Georgian Jewish cemetery in England outside London, Penzance Jewish Cemetery, is taking place in Cornwall, not only because of its intrinsic value as an English Heritage site but also due to a drive to raise funds for the restoration of its walls.



Penzance Jewish Cemetery contains within its walls, 250 years of Cornish Jewish history (last burial of a member of the historic Jewish community being in 1911) with its carefully preserved headstones, 50 of which are in almost perfect condition and a partially preserved Bet Tohorah ("Cleansing House") a very rare feature to survive in cemeteries of this period, all of which have been carefully documented by Pearce in the upcoming book as well as in a previous book, *The Lost Jews of Cornwall*, edited by Pearce and Helen Fry.

The lives of those Jewish families had a major impact on commercial, religious, and economic life. Its miraculous survival is due to the far-sightedness of the Jewish congregation who in 1844 bought the freehold to the whole of the present site and in 1845 began to completely enclose the cemetery having previously partially enclosed it in stages. The original site began its life as an unenclosed burial ground in the 1740s. It is these walls

which now need restoration work to ensure that this now 'closed' burial ground is preserved.

The families who are buried here reveal a remarkable and interesting history, and many descendants of these families, now scattered throughout the UK and abroad, are becoming interested in their Cornish roots..

So, who were these people buried in this unique cemetery? Records indicate there was a Jewish presence in Penzance from the 1740s onward (possibly earlier), many families coming from the Rhineland in Germany or from Holland. While at the height of its population in town never reached more than 30 families, they contributed actively to economic, social and religious life. Some were merchants, peddlers, rabbis, cantors and shochets; some were store owners who distributed wine, spirits, clothing, jewellery, household goods, furniture, watches; others were scholars, pawnbrokers and coppersmiths. Many were poor but most were highly industrious, and they were actively involved in charitable work in the wider community. There were families with the surnames of Woolf, Hart, the Oppenheim, Simmons, Levin and Bischofswerder. Other family names buried here include: Levy, Selig, Jacob, Greenberg (Hillman), Ezekiel, Joseph, Moses, Zalman, Teacher, Barnet, Salzman, and Levine.



The Tohorah - Ritual Cleansing Area

Recently a group, The Friends of Penzance Jewish Cemetery, have been formed with the following objectives:

- i. to better protect, maintain and improve the condition of the Jewish Cemetery in Leskinnick Terrace, Penzance , Cornwall TR18 2HB owned by The Board of Deputies of British Jews;
- ii. to better interpret and explain Jewish faith, burial practice and tradition;
- iii. to encourage more and wider range of people to have an interest in the part Jewish people have played in Cornish history.
- iv. to liaise with the Town Council, Penlee House Gallery and Museum and the owners of the site in the management of the cemetery;
- v. to organise school visits and projects;
- vi. to organise interfaith educational lectures and visits;
- vii. to liaise with the tourist office;
- viii. to encourage the goodwill and involvement of the wider community;
- ix. to foster community spirit and encourage civic pride.

Keith Pearce is custodian of the cemetery and has personally looked after it for the past 17 years. Presently it is locally maintained by the Penzance town Clerk's Office and also is under the supervision of the Penlee House Museum and Gallery.

Leslie Lipert, Treasurer of Kehillat Kernow, the Jewish Community of Cornwall, has been appointed agent by the Board of Deputies of British Jews who owns the cemetery to raise funds for its restoration through private and civic donations and grants.