

KEEPER OF CORNWALL'S JEWISH PAST

by Pat Lidiker

Reviewing a new book by Keith Pearce on how Penzance is preserving its precious Jewish past for future generations.

Fans of Poldark (a second series is currently being filmed for BBC) would have been hard-pressed to find much Jewish content in this adaption of Winston Graham's tale set in Penzance in the 18th century. Yet this was around the time when Jews from the Rhineland and Holland were already arriving in the rugged, mythical southwest to set up their own community and as coppersmiths, merchants, bankers, shopkeepers, peddlers and in other professions and trades.

A few eagle-eyed viewers, though, may have spotted a clue to all this when Ross Poldark bought jewellery for Demelza at 'Solomon, Jeweller' on the High Street! And local historian Keith Pearce, author of the fascinating book *The Jews of Cornwall* (reviewed in WJN earlier this year), points out that there were at least two jewellers established there with the surname of Solomon.

Now Keith has taken another step in preserving the area's colourful Jewish history for future generations by producing a history and guide of the Penzance Jewish Cemetery, dating back to the early 18th century. This is part of an important project spearheaded by the Board of Deputies, which received a grant of £13,100 from the Heritage Lottery Fund. They have combined forces with Kehillat Kernow (the Jewish Community of Cornwall), the Friends of the Penzance Jewish Cemetery and Penlee House Gallery and Museum. Restoration of the cemetery's entire surrounding walls (dating from 1845) and the original Bet Tohorah or Cleansing House (a very rare surviving feature) has been carried out by expert local craftsmen, the Penaluna family.

While remaining a clearly identifiable group, these first Jews arriving over 300 years ago also integrated into Cornish life and many played prominent roles in the wider community. Although the first synagogue would not be built until 1768, a vital first step in ensuring the area was viable for these new arrivals was securing a plot for use as a Jewish burial ground. Today this walled Georgian cemetery is a Grade II listed site, recognised as the finest outside London.

Although some headstones have inevitably disappeared over time, 50 gravestones in almost perfect condition clearly show names such as Woolf, Levy, Levin, Oppenheim, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Hart, Zalman and Simmons. The book has a complete list of headstones and detailed plan of the cemetery, while on other pages



Keith Pearce by Julian Essam

old photographs show some of the notable people who had a major impact on Cornwall's commercial, religious and economic history.

"Although most of their descendants are now scattered far and wide, some are becoming increasingly interested in their Cornish roots and have made a number of generous donations towards this project", Keith points out. His meticulous research into the history behind the stones illustrates how the community flourished. Although not Jewish, he is an associate member of Kehillat Kernow

and has been official custodian of the Penzance Jewish Cemetery for the past 17 years. He took over from his friend, Godfrey Simmons, a great-grandson of Rabbi Barnett Asher Simmons who died in 1860 after serving as the community's minister, shochet and mohel as well as working as a silversmith and jeweller. He says, "My book, *The Jews of Cornwall*, was the result of 30 years of research and took 15 years to complete. This latest guide is part of the package accompanying the Heritage Lottery Grant for the cemetery's restoration. The whole project is also indebted to Leslie Lipert, a leading member of Kehillat Kernow, who put in an enormous amount of work in raising funds for the restoration. We plan for a formal re-opening of the restored cemetery next spring when the grass has regrown."

The book chronicles the painstaking search and first discovery of the cemetery over many years, as absorbing as any historical drama. Now the site is managed by Keith Pearce (BOD Custodian), the Penzance Town Clerk's Office and Penlee House Gallery and Museum. Their support group is the Friends of the Penzance Jewish Cemetery, whose Patron is the Lord Lieutenant of Cornwall, Colonel Edward Bolitho of Trengwainton Manor.

You can arrange a visit to Penzance Jewish cemetery (by appointment only) by contacting Penlee House Gallery and Museum, Morrab Road, Penzance, Cornwall TR18 4HE (telephone 01736 363625). A copy of the 26-page glossy book can be obtained from the same address, cost £4.99 plus £2.50 p&p, or you can order it from good bookshops, quoting ISBN 978-0-9928526-1-0. All proceeds will go to the Penzance Jewish Cemetery.

**For more details, visit the Friends website:
penzancejewishcemetery.org.uk or the websites for
Penzance Town Council, Penlee House or Kehillat Kernow.**