

Lecture on Cornish Jews

Pat Lipert

Local historian and authority on the Jewish Cornish history, Keith Pearce, closed a series of summer lectures at Paul Church in Pol, August 22nd, with a talk on the history of Jews who settled in Cornwall from the early 18th century until 1913.

The event, attended by large groups of people from Inter-Faith communities as well as many members of the Jewish Community, Kehillat Kernow, emphasized the people who comprised the various Jewish communities in the 18th and 19th centuries in Falmouth, Penzance and Truro.

Pearce's lecture which included many rare slides of members of past Jewish communities in the area, began by dispelling various myths about the presence of Jews in Cornwall and their activities in pre-medieval and medieval times.

He discussed how the vanishing of the Cornish language often led to confusions about a Jewish presence prior to the 18th century so that place names such as Marazion, Jews House and Market Jew Street in Penzance, had nothing to do with Jewish people at all but were close phonetically to Cornish words for market places or smelting hearths in the area.

Pearce then went on to discuss various prominent members of the Jacob family of Falmouth highlighting the contributions they made by investing and supporting Cornish mines, rail transport, shipping and harbour enterprises. The influence and contributions made by some of Penzance's prominent Jewish citizens (the Hart families, the Oppenheims, the Bischofswerders, the Simmons family), to civic and religious life was also explained. The role of Freemasonry to the early Jewish communities was also emphasized since the organisation allowed Jews to make contact and interact on various levels with the greater gentile community offering a stable and accessible vehicle for viable economic and civic life.

The wealth of Pearce's knowledge and genuine



Distinguished visitor-Professor Sir Peter Rubin with his friend, Keith Pearce at the Penzance Jewish Cemetery which has recently been restored. Both men were contemporaries at Redruth Grammar School and at Emmanuel College, Cambridge. Sir Peter served as chair of the General Medical Council of the UK and is an Honorary Fellow of Emmanuel College and Emeritus Professor at Nottingham University.

love for his subject also allowed for many poignant anecdotes about who these various people were, allowing them to 'live again' and gave the audience a greater appreciation of the contributions they made to Cornish life. Because of Pearce's meticulous documentation through his definitive histories of Cornish Jews, they have not been forgotten.

Pearce, who also is custodian of the Penzance

Jewish cemetery (recently restored), closed by emphasizing the value to the cultural and historic aspects of Cornish life with the ongoing restoration projects for the Ponsharden Cemeteries (The Falmouth Jewish Cemetery and the Dissenter's Burying Ground), as well as the Penzance Jewish Cemetery which is one of the finest examples of Jewish Georgian Cemeteries outside London in the country.