

## Notes on the Medieval Jewish Community of Exeter

By Myra Fonceca, Community Researcher – Telling Our Stories, finding our roots;  
Exeter's Multi-coloured History

The first recorded mention of a medieval Jewish community in the city of Exeter was in 1181 when Piers Deulesaut paid one mark to deposit his bonds with the king, Henry II.

Just seven years later, in 1188, an application was made to establish a Beth Din, a Jewish court of law, for the resolution of disputes. The cost of the application was 1 mark, worth 66p in today's money.

That there were sufficient Jews living in the city to require a court of this kind would suggest that there was an established community of several families by that time.

It is thought that the development of the stannaries (tin mines), around Dartmoor encouraged Jews to move to the remote city of Exeter in the latter part of the 12<sup>th</sup> century but there is no firm evidence that this is so.

The fact that there are no records of Jews living Exeter before 1181 does not preclude the likelihood that they could have been there for a hundred years before that date. Jews had arrived in England, from Rouen, with the Norman invaders in 1066 and played a vital role in the establishment and growth of Norman and Angevin rule for over 200 years until they were finally expelled from the country in 1290. From that time on no Jews lived legally in England until the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

### **Background**

As Anglo Norman rule became established in cities following the invasion, Jewish communities would follow as they were essential to the economic growth of the newly emerging English state. Jews were the major traders in silver plate which was melted down to mint coins that helped legitimise the new regime. They did trade in other commodities, such as wine, old clothes, and agricultural produce and provided services to their own communities. They were also renowned for their expertise as doctors and scholars but undoubtedly their major role in the Middle Ages was as moneylenders.

### **Church**

Jews held a unique position within Latin Christendom during this period.

Early church doctrine had established that Jews should be allowed to live among Christians in order to serve them as an act of atonement for the death of Christ. They were also to be protected, because the concept of Apocalypse (which was eagerly anticipated by Christians during the Middle Ages) required that all Jews would convert at the end of this world.

However, by the 12<sup>th</sup> century, Jews were constantly swept up in the power struggles between Church and King and many theologians struggled to reconcile the reality of the need for moneylenders with the church's stance against usury.

As the Latin Christian church increasingly preached against the sin of usury the hypocrisy of borrowing heavily from Jews to fund the expansion of the finest cathedrals and monasteries created a sense of resentment and opprobrium towards the very people who were providing this essential service.

### **Politics**

The turbulent politics of Medieval England meant that kings and nobles had to raise loans to pay for the cost of war and Jewish moneylenders played a pivotal part in providing the finance. Mercenaries were an integral part of armies but their only loyalty was to the money they were paid and those intending to go to war had to be provided with sufficient coin to keep the troops in the field. Weapons, supplies, horses and transport all had to be provided before any expedition could be mounted. The emergence of the crusading movement in the late 11<sup>th</sup> century and throughout the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries also made moneylenders essential to the funding of costly expeditions to the Holy Land.

### **Violence towards Jews**

Resentment towards Jews for the debts owed to them, for their 'otherness', and for their association with the death of Christ exploded into sporadic violent attacks on them in England and throughout Europe during the late 11<sup>th</sup> century.

In London, during the coronation of Richard I in 1189, the Jews of London were attacked and copycat attacks in most major cities followed but no violence towards the Jews in Exeter is recorded. Whole communities were massacred in Norwich, York and Lincoln at this time. However, the Sheriff of Devon was expressly instructed to protect the Jewish community of Exeter in 1218 which suggests that some attacks did take place.

When he suffered an assault the Exeter chirographer, Jacob Copin, took his attackers to court in 1270 and Robert of Bole Hill, his wife Christiana and William le Layte were accused of the attack. They absconded before the case was heard so were likely to have been guilty. William le Layte was later associated with another case where his ward refused to pay a debt to a Jew.

At Upway, near Axminster, where a Jewish peddler was murdered, the local people boycotted the inn where the attack happened and it eventually it fell into disuse.

Relations between Jews and Christians were as often amicable and there is evidence that both Christian and Jewish chirographers of Exeter supported each other if there were disputes.

The frequency with which the Church felt the need to forbid Jews and Christians to socialise is evidence that it was common practice for the two communities to join in celebrations together (though never at Easter).

### **Exchequer of the Jews**

One result of the violence of the late 12<sup>th</sup> century was the loss of many of the Jews' bonds, burned by their debtors during the riots. The king set up an Exchequer of the Jews, attached to the Royal Exchequer, to keep such bonds, known as chirographs, safe in the future. *Archae*, locked chests, were established by the authorities for the storage of them. Keys for these were kept by two Jews, two Christians and the King's representative.

It is from the documents in these *archae* that much of the source material about the Exeter Jews can be found.

The keepers were paid one penny between them each time a bond was removed. A prominent chirographer of the Exeter *archae* was Jacob Copin, who was eventually hanged in 1280. The names of the chirographers of Exeter are on record from 1224 until the *archae* were confiscated by Edward I in 1290. The hereditary nature of the post is illustrated by Josce Crespin who officiated from 1224-66 and his son Jacob who was the last chirographer of the Exeter *archae* from 1275-90.

### **The *Donum***

Both Richard I and King John issued charters confirming that Jews were under their protection as they 'and all their property belonged to the king' and quoted earlier charters (now lost) issued by Henry I and Henry II. These charters gave Jews the right to live and trade throughout the land (Christian moneylenders could only operate within their own county), to be exempt from certain tolls, to build synagogues, and to have both Jewish and Christian representation in courts of law. Thus it can be seen that with royal protection Jews had rights that local Christians did not. However, the life of a Medieval Jew in England at this time was precarious and dependent on the authority and whim of the individual king.

Each king was able to raise taxes by demanding a '*donum*' or tax from the Jewish communities and these were often extortionate and far higher than those demanded of Christians. It was thus in the interest of the king to encourage the Jews to make money; the richer they became, the greater his opportunity to tax them. When Aaron of Lincoln died in 1186 he was said to be the richest man in England and all of his bonds went to the king. So rich was Aaron that a special exchequer was set up to deal with his affairs and this was not wound up until 1194.

There are no records showing that any individual of the Exeter Jewry was particularly wealthy but the fluctuations in their fortunes can be judged by the amounts they raised towards various *donum*. When the £100,000 ransom had to be raised to release Richard I from captivity by the Emperor Henry VI, the amount demanded from the Jews was £5,000. Only one man from Exeter, Amiot, was able to contribute £1.3s.3d. of the £2 demanded of him. Amiot lived, at one time, in a house in the High Street that he rented from Godeknight.

### **Names**

The Jewish communities of Medieval England (in common with the new rulers) were essentially Norman, which can be deduced from names of Exeter Jews such as

Deulecresse, Deulesaut, Amite, Comtesse etc.

The names of the Jews mentioned in official records can tell us much about the community. The inclusion of many women's names points to an equality of opportunity for a woman to trade and especially to continue the family business after the death of her husband. One such influential widow was Amite, who was one of the leaders of the Exeter community in the latter half of the 13<sup>th</sup> century.

The nomadic nature of Jewish traders gives rise to the possibility of confusion as their names would change depending on where they were living at a certain time. For example, if Aaron moved into the Exeter community from Dorchester he would be referred to as Aaron of Dorchester but if he then moved on to Bristol he would have been known as Aaron of Exeter and if he then went to Hereford, he would have been known as Aaron of Bristol. This makes it difficult to trace an individual's movements through records but it is certain that in the medieval period Jews were possibly even more mobile than either the military or Christian religious.

### **Coin-clipping**

Jews were the chief suspects during the coin-clipping scandals of 1278-79 and ten Exeter Jews, together with one Christian were arrested. These included Jacob Copin and Jorin. The latter was the grandson of Amiot and son of a past chirographer, Ursell. Coin clipping could be very profitable. The edges of silver pennies were clipped and these filings were then melted down to provide silver plate. A 'crosslet' design on the reverse of the coin was intended to show clearly if it had been tampered with but medieval minting was not so accurate that it deterred the clippers.

In England overall 680 Jews were arrested and 293 of those were hanged.

At about this time Jacob Copin and his son Blakeman were accused of the murder of a Christian and in 1278 Jacob was hanged but whether for coin-clipping or murder is not known.

### **Size of the community**

The size of the Jewish community in Exeter varied over the years but was never very big. *Archae* records show that between 1237 and 1275 bonds were issued by twenty-two Jews. In 1276 there were about seventeen lenders. It must be remembered that those names were usually the head of the family, so when calculating the actual size of the community the presence of wives, children and servants must be added. By the time of the expulsion in 1290 only one Jewish family is recorded as living in Exeter, that of Comtesse who, like Amiot, had a house in the High Street. But *archae* records were only concerned with those engaged in moneylending so it is likely that there would have been a wider community of Jews who provided specialist services to their own communities as well as trading with Christians.

### **CONCLUSION**

Official records show a small but active Jewish community for a little under 100 years in Exeter, from 1181 to 1290, but it is more likely that Jews were present in the city for

a hundred years before that.

That they moved to Exeter in order to finance the expanding stanneries is conjecture and, as Exeter was a city with close connections to the monarchy, it is equally likely that they would have migrated to the city quite early after the invasion to take advantage of the general economic expansion of the period.

There was no synagogue in the city at that time and their nearest official Jewish centre would have been in Winchester, through which they would have received demands for the regular *donum* demanded of them by the king.

There is no evidence to prove that the community was attacked by the townspeople but physical violence against individual Jews by Christians was recorded, as was violence by Jews towards Christians.

Most Jews tended to live close to each other and the High Street of Exeter is mentioned as the area of their settlement. There is evidence that Jews travelled all over the county on business and that individuals were mobile, moving from city to city as occasion demanded.

## **SOURCES**

*The most comprehensive sources on the Medieval Jews of Exeter are:*

The Susser Archive at [www.jewishgen.org/JCR-UK/susser](http://www.jewishgen.org/JCR-UK/susser)

England's Jewish Solution: Experiment and Expulsion, 1262-1290 (Cambridge Studies in Medieval Life and Thought) by Robin R Mundill (16 May 2002) pp 169-176

*For the Jewish position within Latin Christian Society generally:*

Any books by Anna Abulafia on Jewish Christian relations in the Middle Ages, in particular:

Christian Jewish Relations 1000-1300: Jews in the Service of Medieval Christendom (The Medieval World) by Anna Abulafia (4 Jan 2011)

Religious Violence between Christians and Jews: Medieval Roots, Modern Perspectives (Palgrave Macmillan) by Anna Sapir Abulafia (9 Feb 2002)

*Also*

The Formation of a Persecuting Society: Power and Deviance in Western Europe 950-1250 (Blackwell Publishing) by R.I. Moore (2006)

England under the Norman and Angevin Kings: 1075-1225 (New Oxford History of England) by Robert Bartlett (2002)

