

The King's Jews

by Myra Fonceca, Community Researcher – Telling Our Stories, finding our roots;

Exeter's Multi-coloured History

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Will you come for a walk with me along Exeter High Street? There is a house there belonging to a man called Godeknight, which he rents to Amiot – a Jew. Amiot has received a demand to pay £2 towards the 65,000 pounds of silver that is being demanded by the Holy Roman Emperor, Henry VI, to ransom the King of England, whom he has captured. The King in question is Richard I, Richard the Lionheart, and the year is 1193 – a mere 820 years ago.

Jews held a unique position in Medieval society. They were the only non-Christian religion that was tolerated in the Western Christian world. But tolerated because they were the property of the king - named as The Kings' Jews. This, of course, gave the Jews special protection - anyone harming them was, in effect, harming the king. They were not slaves, but free men with many privileges. Nevertheless they were vulnerable to every whim of the rapacious Medieval kings, who squeezed them for money whenever they wanted. Donums (from the Latin for gift) imposed on the Jews were higher than for Christians. Amiot's £2 was three times more than a citizen of London would have paid. As it happened, poor Amiot only managed to raise £1.13.3p!

The church too protected the Jews to comply with biblical prophesies but it blamed them for Christ's death and a succession of popes imposed restrictions on them – saying they must be subservient to Christians - they should wear a yellow badge, like this, to make clear that they were Jewish.

In 1181 Piers Deulesalt applied to set up a Beth Din - the Jewish court -in Exeter to try disputes among their community. So there must have been sufficient numbers of

them in Exeter to warrant the fee of 10 marks (about £7)...but it is possible that a small community had existed here since the Normans first arrived in the latter part of 11th century. But 1181 is the first record we have of their presence in Exeter.

Restrictions on Jews owning land, on carrying weapons and on the work they could do had reduced their opportunities to make a living so money-lending became their main source of income. And in this they were the masters.

Kings, barons and knights needing money to fund wars or go on crusade went to the Jews,

Bishops and Abbots who wanted to build impressive churches and monasteries went to the Jews,

Entrepreneurs wanting to finance a new tin mine on Dartmoor went to the Jews,

Families wanting a dowry for their daughter or a farmer needing to borrow money for extra stock or seed – all went to the Jews.

Jews became the bankers of the Middle Ages.

CHIROGRAPHS

Here's how money-lending worked.

Two copies of the contract were made on one piece of parchment – a chirograph.

This was then cut through the middle so that both lender and borrower kept one piece each and – if there was a dispute the fitting together of the pieces proved its legality.

These bonds were kept in a special locked chest and the keys were held by respected members of both Christian and Jewish communities, called chirographers.

One of the chirographers of the Exeter Jews was Jacob Copin – and we know a lot about Jacob. He held the job for fourteen years from 1266. Jacob was no retiring Devon violet, his name appears in court and tax records several times – in 1270 he accused a debtor, Robert of Bole Hill, his wife Christiana and William le Layte of assaulting him in Newton Abbot. Jacob was probably in the right because they all fled before the case was heard.

But Jacob's downfall began when he was arrested on coin-clipping charges.

COIN CLIPPING.

Coin clipping could be very profitable. The edges of silver pennies like this could be filed off, the metal melted down and sold as bullion. And the Jews were thought to be the chief culprits. Jacob and his son Blakeman, were among the 17 Exeter Jews arrested and sent to London in a purge of 1278, although they were allowed bail and no record shows what happened to them. However, 293 Jews were hanged in London.

It was about this time that Jacob Copin was hanged but whether for coin-clipping or for the possible for the murder of a Christian no one is sure.

As Jacob Copin had found, people who borrowed from the Jews resented being in debt to them and this showed itself in spontaneous attacks on Jewish communities. In Lincoln,, Kings Lynn, and York whole communities were wiped out. However, the Exeter Jewry appears to have escaped any such pogroms. The sheriff here personally read out an order to leave them in peace and it seems the people of the city took notice of this.

Moneylending was very much a family business - for men and women.

Amiot, his son Deodatus and his son-in-law, Ursell are all listed among those who paid the donum. As did Comtesse, Amite and Aunterre, all women moneylenders. One woman regularly travelled the twenty-five miles to Colyton, where she kept a house for her use when she was there.

The fortunes of the Jews, depended very much on the amount of donum that the king demanded. Sometimes it reduced them to paupers, at others they had time to become

very wealthy. When he died in 1186, Aaron of Lincoln was the richest man in all of England and all his debts went to the King – a profitable exercise for the king.

Conditions for the Jews became more and more difficult throughout Edward I's reign. The king's taxes became a great burden, while the church imposed heavier restrictions on taking interest on loans. In 1190 Jews provided about 15% of the king's income but this dropped to just 1% in 1290.

So will you walk with me again along Exeter High Street, just one hundred years after we met Amiot – Comtesse, the money-lender, has a house there now. But she has **gone**.

All the Jews have gone from Exeter.

Because in 1290, Edward I expelled **all the Jews from England**. He no longer needed them – Italian bankers were lending him money now.

No Jewish communities were allowed in England or Britain again until 17th century. Tom's topic of interest was the resettlement Jews of Exeter but tonight he would like to tell you about his experience as a volunteer on this project..