

Bath Jewish Burial Ground, Combe Down

Ann Cullis

Have you ever walked along Bradford Road, opposite the entrance to Mulberry Park, and wondered what is behind the high wall? Maybe you've noticed the narrow entry alongside the Forester & Flower pub, called Greendown Place. You might even have peered through the bars of the wrought iron gate, and seen a small quiet cemetery.

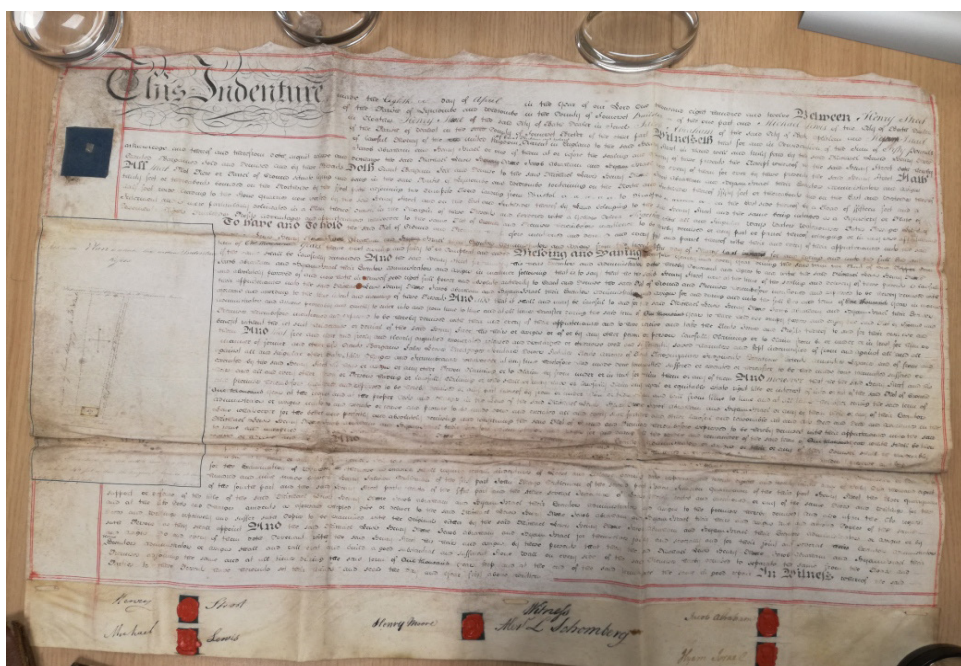


This is the old Jewish Burial Ground, a solitary green place, so near to the traffic on the main road and yet feeling like somewhere that belongs to another century. And indeed it does – the burials here date from 1812 to 1921, so the last interment here was exactly 100 years ago.

Between the burial of Sarah Moses in 1812 and Solomon Kesseff in 1921 lies a hidden story, a community bound together by faith and active in Bath's business and social life. We believe that there are more people buried under this ground than it appears today. Many headstones have broken off so we will never know who lies there, and there are some areas with apparently no burials and others where they are closely-aligned – this suggests that the burial ground is in fact full. Surprising as it seems now, it was very common in the 19th and early 20th century for people to help themselves to old headstones from churchyards and cemeteries to use for building materials.



The story of the burial ground starts in 1812 when four men from the Bath Jewish community signed a lease for the piece of ground with the freeholder Henry Street, a builder and quarry master. The four who signed the lease were Michael Lewis, clothes dealer; Henry Moore, jeweller; Jacob Abraham, optician; and Hyam Israel, broker, and they agreed a peppercorn rent (which at the time meant, literally, a peppercorn to be offered to Mr Street once a year, should he demand it). Abraham seems to have been a successful optician in Bath and advertised regularly; his advertisement of 23 December 1819 states proudly that he is Optician to His Royal Highness the Duke of Gloucester and his Grace the Duke of Wellington. We have not found definitive research records for the other three.



The magnificent lease, handwritten on a huge piece of parchment, is in the Bath Record Office, complete with its signatures and red wax seals.

The piece of land that the Jewish community leased in 1812 was only about half the length of the current plot; the rear (eastern) section was acquired later in the 19th century together with a smaller rectangular piece of land on the south side.



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Why Combe Down? Whereas 19th century Church of England churches usually have a cemetery surrounding them or immediately adjacent, the Jewish faith requires the burial ground to be on the edge of an urban area and away from the community's synagogue or shul. It is likely therefore that Jacob Abraham and the others looked for available land on the edge of Bath, and it was probably a chance connection – what we'd now call networking - that led them to hear of Henry Street owning a plot he was willing to lease. So the choice of Combe Down has no deeper significance than this.

And where was the synagogue? A building in Kingsmead Street was used as a synagogue from 1821; before this, services would have been held in people's homes. It was not until 1842 that a purpose-built synagogue was opened in the Corn Street/Avon Street area. This closed for a period in the 1860s but re-opened in 1876 and was in use until 1902 (the building was demolished in 1938). As we have seen, burials continued until at least 1921, so the community was still meeting for services which were held in people's homes; Kerstein's Hotel, a kosher establishment in Duke Street, organised services until the 1940s.

The Friends of Bath Jewish Burial Ground is a group of volunteers who are working to conserve the burial ground, undertaking repairs and conservation to the headstones and tombs. We maintain the plot to keep it free of brambles and weeds, but we treasure its natural life of wild flowers, insects, snails, birds and the beautiful Goat Willow tree (recently pollarded and shaped). We have been raising funds to pay for conservation works and are pleased that the tomb of Joseph Sigmond has now been restored by Sally Strachey Conservation.



Sigmond's tomb and the one next to it (which we believe to be his wife Catherine) are the only two 'chest tombs'. Sigmond was a surgeon-dentist and invented an early form of toothpaste, the *Quintessence of Pearl* dentifrice, and published his *Short Essay on the Teeth* in 1790 which promoted the then-novel idea of brushing regularly to ensure dental health. Despite the majestic size of his tomb, Sigmond's Will opens with the words:

I Joseph Sigmond of the City of Bath in the County of Somerset do make and publish my last Will and Testament in manner following that is to say in the first place I do desire to be buried in a private manner and as little expense as may be consistent with decency and my situation of life.

Perhaps his friends decided to ignore this modesty and humility, and contributed to ensure his passing in 1832 was marked with due importance.

We have also been researching the 19th century Census returns and other published records to find out what we can about the people buried here.



Many of the inscriptions are badly deteriorated or have completely de-laminated (flaked off) and are lost forever, but where we can discern names and dates we are able to follow the clues. Some inscriptions are only in Hebrew, some in both Hebrew and English, so we have been helped by friends in the Jewish community who can read and translate for us. Sometimes a low angle of sunlight on a clear spring or autumn day will suddenly render an inscription legible for the first time, and there is something very moving about reading a long-dead name for the first time in living memory.

Another feature of the burial ground is the small single-room stone building with a tiled roof in the south-west corner, whose window faces Greendown Place.



There has been uncertainty over whether this had a religious purpose at any time, but increasingly we think that it did not, and that it was a dwelling-house. It pre-dates the acquisition of the plot for the burial ground, and our research indicates that at various times the occupants have acted as informal caretakers, perhaps holding a key to the gate. Census returns show that quite large families lived here in the mid-19th century, for example the Dowling household in 1841 comprised three adults and four children, and it is probable that it had a second room, now disappeared.

Find out more

The Jewish Burial Ground is always open to the public during Heritage Open Days each September, and we are delighted to show people round privately at any time by appointment – please contact us via the website or Facebook.

More information about the burial ground, who is buried here, and how to support us is on our website:

<https://www.bathjewishburialground.org/>

<https://www.facebook.com/bathjewishburialground/>

<https://twitter.com/fobjbg>

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ann Cullis is the secretary of the Friends of Bath Jewish Burial Ground CIC. She is a volunteer Welcome Ambassador for Bath BID, a Trustee of the Museum of Bath at Work (Bath Industrial Heritage Trust), and volunteers with the American Museum & Gardens. She is interested in small, unexpected and hidden histories in Bath.