

# Sold for £277,000: Lowry's shulgoer masterpiece

BY ROSA DOHERTY

▶ WHEN THE iconic artist LS Lowry completed the hauntingly beautiful painting in 1960, he is believed to have assumed that the building that caught his eye was a church.

But the striking Gothic structure, with its distinctive twin turrets, was actually the synagogue in Merthyr Tydfil. The painting was sold by Christie's for £277,000 last week.

The sale was news to the Foundation for Jewish Heritage, which has purchased the building and is renovating it for a Welsh Jewish Heritage Centre.

Michael Mail, chief executive of Foundation, told the JC:

"It is wonderful to think that the synagogue, and Merthyr, is part of LS Lowry's body of work and that his famous matchstick characters include Merthyr's very own, captured admiring the synagogue."

Christie's specialists, Alice Murray and Elizabeth Comba, said: "Lowry encountered this building on a visit to Wales, probably with his friend and patron Monty Bloom.

"It is an accurate depiction of the synagogue at Merthyr Tydfil.

"In recent times, this Grade II-listed building from 1877 has been identified as among the most important 16 synagogues at risk in Europe.



**It is lovely to think the figures may have been congregants**

"The synagogue is particularly interesting because it was listed in 1978 as the oldest former extant synagogue in Wales. It stands as one of the most important

from an architectural point of view in the UK because of its use of the rare, Gothic style and unique appearance."

While Mr Mail had no idea who bought the artwork, he hoped that its owner would one day allow it to be displayed at the shul, he said.

"We would love to be able to display the painting at some point as part of our project," he said. "We can only ask and hope."

He added: "We hope that whoever has bought it will be equally interested in the building and its history."

The Christie's experts said the painting was a "rare example" of Lowry's work, "whose name is synonymous with depictions of the industrial landscape of the North".

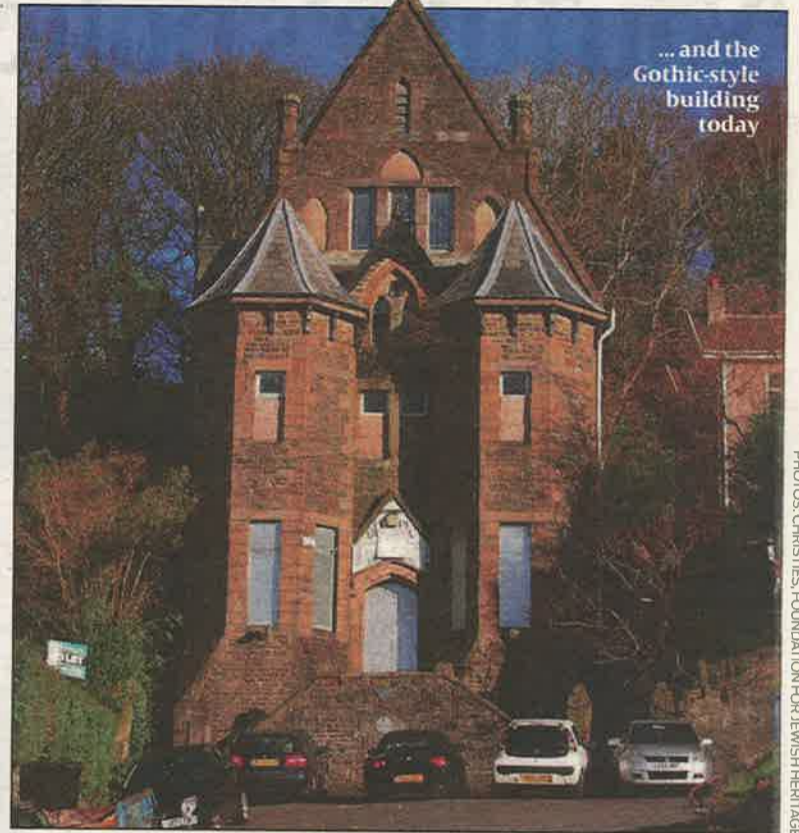
Yet the artist "also depicted religious buildings and places of worship throughout his career", they added.

The striking features of the synagogue have been a magnet for artists down the years.

When put up for auction, it was described by Christie's as a "church", suggesting that Lowry may not have known



Evocative: LS Lowry's painting of the Merthyr Tydfil Synagogue...



... and the Gothic-style building today

PHOTOS: CHRISTIE'S; FOUNDATION FOR JEWISH HERITAGE

already shown in the project."

The Prince of Wales visited the synagogue site last year, where project leaders explained its history and future plans.

Lowry remains one of the top-selling

modern British artists at auction, with Christie's holding the world record for his work. *The Football Match* sold by Christie's London in May 2011 for £5,641,250, and *Piccadilly Circus, London*, sold in November 2011 for the same amount.

that he was painting a synagogue. At the time, "there was still a Jewish community functioning here", Mr Mail explained.

"It is lovely to think that the painting — which includes the matchstick figures looking up at the building — might have been of congregants on their way to or from a Shabbat service.

"Because of how unique the building is, it doesn't look particularly like a synagogue, so maybe he thought he was painting a church. It is curious."

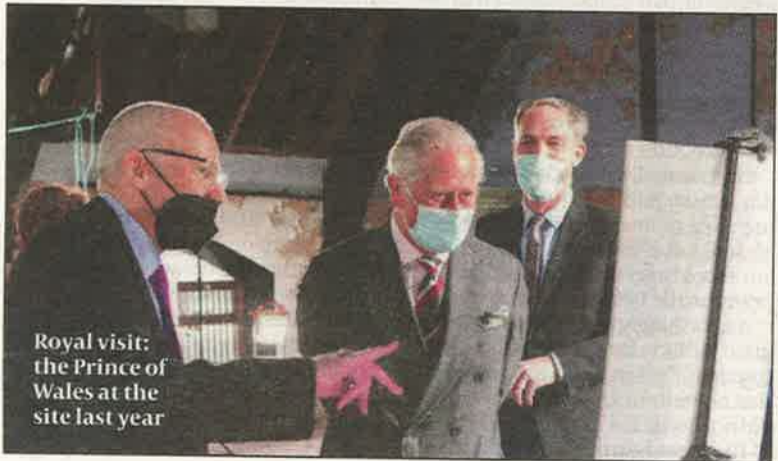
The Merthyr community ceased to function in 1983, with members moving on to larger Welsh communities in places such as Cardiff.

Since being purchased by the Foundation in 2019, renovation works have been in progress to make the building watertight and structurally safe.

An application for £3 million has been made to the National Lottery Heritage Fund, although the project's overall cost is expected to be closer to £4 million.

"Knowing that Lowry painted the synagogue is a great boost for us and what we want to do," Mr Mail added.

"You can see from the painting — and in real life — that it is a striking building and I hope it adds to the interest that is



Royal visit: the Prince of Wales at the site last year