

The Merthyr Tydfil Synagogue: a story of a community, a heritage and a future

RE Today interviewed **Michael Mail**, Chief Executive of the Foundation For Jewish Heritage about the story of a wonderful building.

It is a standard practice for school RME, RVE and RE to teach about holy buildings. But this is sometimes done in ways that are abstracted from the realities of the history and ups and downs of community life. Try the following approach with your pupils in which they guess the future at five key points in the history of a remarkable Jewish place of worship in Merthyr Tydfil. Tell the pupils the story in the five parts given below, and at each point ask them to discuss in pairs what they think will happen next, write it down and then hear the next part of the narrative.

City to Chicago, and the rails from Moscow to St Petersburg were made of Merthyr Tydfil iron. Jewish people from all over Europe, hearing of the town's growth, travelled there seeking new opportunities in the Welsh valleys. The Jewish community grew up alongside the nonconformist Christians of the town. The Jewish community included jewellers, tailors, bootmakers, bakers and families with other trades. How do you think the Jewish community chose to mark their presence in the town and strengthen their sense of identity and togetherness?

PART 1 A story of a remarkable building.

The story of Judaism is a story of migration and change. Back in 1900, 90 per cent of the world's Jewish people lived in Europe. Today it is 10 per cent. Back in 1900, a third of the population of the great city of Baghdad were Jewish: there are just five Jewish people who live in Baghdad today. It is not so surprising that Jewish communities have often been on the move, carrying their skills with them and working within local communities in all kinds of ways.

Today, Merthyr Tydfil is a small town in mid-Wales, but 200 years ago, it was growing fast, and was the biggest town in the world for iron-working. The rails on the tracks for the railways from New York

PART 2 Identity and community: the first Merthyr Tydfil synagogue.

For a Jewish community to practise the faith and culture which they carry with them, a synagogue is a huge advantage and so the Jewish people of Merthyr Tydfil first built a synagogue in 1848. About 40 Jewish people lived in the town, and their community was growing. Regular shabat worship, prayer and reading from the Torah scrolls – handwritten and kept in a beautiful arc or cupboard – made the space sacred for Jewish people. Over the next ten years, as more Jews came to Merthyr Tydfil, that first little synagogue became too small so the community needed to make new plans. Guess what they did.

PART 3 Growing and embedding Jewish life in a Welsh iron town.

In 1859 a dedicated section of the local cemetery was set aside for Jewish burials and in 1866 the community opened a day school, attended by 23 boys and girls, including some from Christian families. The community started raising funds to build a much bigger synagogue. The famous Baron Rothschild donated £200. Building work started in 1876 and, at a cost of about £2,300, the new synagogue opened a year later. It could seat about 200 people and included a school classroom for 60 children, and upstairs women's gallery, washrooms and a beautiful ark for the Torah scrolls.

The Jewish community in Merthyr Tydfil kept on growing till 1919 when the Jewish population was about 400.

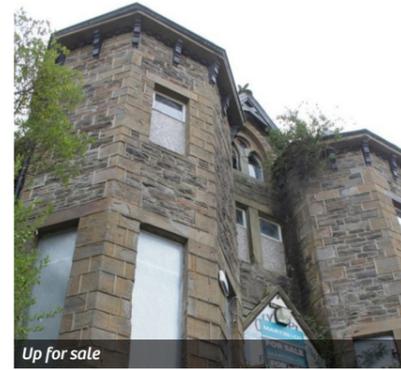


The top of Church Street, Merthyr Tydfil

But as the town's importance declined, so did the number of synagogue members, which fell to 175 by 1937. Only 20 Jews remained in 1979. By the 1980s the Jewish community in Merthyr Tydfil was so small that worship in the synagogue stopped. Guess what happened next.



A PowerPoint presentation supporting this article is available on the NATRE website.



Up for sale

thought it should be pulled down, or sold and turned into a grand house. But Jewish people in Wales and the UK have not forgotten the building, so guess what they did in 2019.

PART 5 A building reborn, repurposed and revived.

The idea that the building could be revived as a museum seemed like a good one. Maybe it could become 'The Jewish Heritage Centre for Wales.' The centre would celebrate the presence of Jewish communities within the larger Welsh community and provide a focal point for education for children and young people to learn about the Jewish traditions, customs, culture, beliefs, spirituality and practice. A group of interested people began fundraising and planning, and now, with the support of the Foundation for Jewish Heritage, that is exactly what is happening. The most urgent repairs have been done, and the new museum and heritage centre – with support from King Charles, formerly the Prince of Wales – should be open to the public in a couple of years.

Imagine you are the planners for the new centre: what will you put in place to make it brilliant?

Use the website of the project for the next part of this task: jewishheritage.wales/merthyr-tydfil-synagogue-history/



Old photo of interior for worship



Star of David window

PART 4 What to do with a holy building that has no congregation?

The shrinking Jewish community in Merthyr Tydfil no longer met for worship the synagogue. It finally closed in 1983 and the building was sold to a Christian community and used as a church for a while. When that closed down, a local gym used the building for fitness classes, but then it fell derelict. The roof leaked and the floors rotted. Some people

- Look at the pictures of the Merthyr Tydfil synagogue taken over the years and read the captions carefully because you are going to be involved in a role play activity which asks what should be done to celebrate the Welsh history of Jewish communities. How should the Merthyr Tydfil synagogue be transformed from a derelict old gym into a shared heritage museum of Judaism?
- In a team of four pupils you will need to do some research about Jewish celebrations, artefacts, scriptures, values

and communities. Begin with a collection of all the information that you know already about synagogues and Jewish life. Then look at the websites of two other Jewish museums, Camden in London, and in Manchester. What do you see on these sites that could become part of the Welsh Jewish heritage centre?

- You are to create a booklet advising the Jewish heritage centre on how to make the old Merthyr Tydfil synagogue into an interesting museum and centre for Jewish heritage in Welsh national life. What are the most important objects and artefacts which are found in synagogues? What about the Torah scrolls, a reading desk or *bimah*, an ark or cupboard in which the Torah scrolls are kept and an eternal light symbolising the divine presence (this is called the *Ner Tamid*)? How will such objects be displayed in the centre?
- You will also need to know something about the traditions of synagogue architecture and the use of symbolism which often refers to Jewish understanding of, for example, the Ten Commandments, the goodness of the Earth or the Jewish celebrations which go on throughout the year.

- Your report should answer these four questions:
 - 1 What artefacts or significant objects should be on display in the new heritage centre? Describe them carefully and give your reasons for their selection.
 - 2 The new centre will be receiving many visits from school pupils on educational trips. What can be done to make Jewish history and community life come alive for groups of pupils younger than yourselves who come to visit?
 - 3 Sometimes museums focus just on objects to

look at, but a religious museum also needs to focus on what holy texts say and on the values of the faith and on the spirituality of the community. What kinds of exhibits or experiences can you plan that will enable the Welsh Jewish heritage centre to really engage visitors with these aspects of Jewish life?

- 4 Of course one important part of the history of Judaism is connected to the persecution of Jewish people, including the Nazi genocide of the 1930s–40s. Parts of this story are too troubling to share with younger pupils but they should not be forgotten because the Holocaust carries a lesson for us all today about the importance of guarding our communities against hatred directed at any religion. How do you think the heritage centre can help people to understand what happened during the Holocaust and how such prejudice can be reduced in the future?

Some artistic aspects to your project

Are you able to create as a part of your project an outline drawing of the interior of the new heritage centre as you imagine it? What will you do with the interior space? How would you divide it up and create a walkthrough experience for your visitors?

Also consider collecting images of the ten artefacts you think it is most important to display, and writing a short commentary on each one.

Think about the ways in which the centre might be able to use different creative arts such as painting, stained glass, metalwork, woodwork and calligraphy to show and share some of the most important features of Jewish life.