**Jewish people in early Britain: Location, language, culture**

Jews arrived in Britain with the Norman regime, following the Norman Conquest of 1066. It seems that during the reign of William Rufus (1087-1100) Jews were encouraged to migrate from Normandy and support the government by offering financial services. At this time Christians were forbidden from lending money with interest (the sin of usury) and so Jews provided this service for the Crown. By 1100 a small Jewish community had been established, notably in London, and soon in other county towns and cities.

English Jews were multilingual: they spoke English and French, and read and wrote in Hebrew for both religious and business purposes: their contracts were often written both in Hebrew and in Latin. Many of the English Jews had French names, such as Bonefey or Dieulecresse. In other words, the English Jews were a cosmopolitan immigrant community, with strong European ties. They were embedded in their communities, and probably shared a great deal with the French-speaking Norman elite that governed the country and in particular, closely managed the Jews and their affairs.

**Jews as servants of the Crown**

By the thirteenth century, there were probably about 3,000 Jews in England, mostly concentrated in the county towns – like Lincoln, London, Norwich, Oxford, Winchester, and York – but they also spread out through the entire country, even reaching Wales. English Jews lived among their Christian neighbours, but they maintained their own places of worship – synagogues – ritual baths, and cemeteries. Remains of their communities can often be seen in street-names, such as ‘Old Jewry’ and ‘Jewry Street’ in London or ‘Jewry Street’ in Winchester, as well as in names such as the ‘Jews’ House’ at Lincoln, or in the sites of Jewish cemeteries in Oxford (now the Botanic Gardens) and York. Jews did not live in ghettoes, as was the case elsewhere in later centuries, but like other ethnic groups at the time they lived in particular parts of towns, as their trade required, and to make social and religious life easier. They usually lived in rented properties, as there were restrictions on their ownership of land. English Jews tended to live near castles, which were often the headquarters of sheriffs who managed counties on behalf of the Crown. At times of danger Jews fled for royal protection to castles. In 1190 they fled to Clifford’s Tower in York, but their hopes were dashed when local knights had them burnt to death.

The Jewish community in England was organised in a distinctive way. Jews were not ‘subjects’ like other members of the population, but were rather ‘servants’ of the King. During the reign of Henry I (1100-1135), Jews were issued a ‘charter of liberties’, which included the rights to move freely throughout the country and to have access to royal justice and a fair trial. In return for these privileges – which also made clear that the Jewish people were a separate group from their neighbours – they were expected to exist to serve the King: they were answerable to him alone and were protected by his officials who also supervised and taxed Jewish property and income. Jews were encouraged to lend money with interest, to rich and poor, to individuals and institutions, such as monasteries. In turn, the King benefited from their profits both by regular taxes and by occasional sudden requests for payments. Jewish officials managed the tax burden within the community, and attempted to distribute it fairly among rich and poor Jewish people. The unusual economic position of the Jews meant that some were able to become extremely wealthy, but above all they were vulnerable to attack.

There was constant tension between the Crown and the Church over the treatment of the Jewish people: the Church wanted to force them to pay tithes (taxes owed to the Church), to restrict their finances (which they saw as a sin, ‘usury’), and, increasingly, church leaders sought to convert Jewish people. Under King Henry III (1207-1272) the church’s wishes were promoted vigorously, and houses for Jewish converts in London and Oxford were founded. Henry’s long reign saw a transformation in attitudes to Jews, with greater impositions and heavier limitation place on their work. It is not surprising perhaps that it was Henry III’s son – Edward I – and the Archbishop of Canterbury who together masterminded the expulsion of the Jews in 1290.

*Adapted from* ***Poems of protest: Meir ben Elijah and the Jewish people of early Britain***[*http://www.ourmigrationstory.org.uk/oms/put-a-curse-on-my-enemies-meir-ben-elijah-and-the-jews-of-early-norwich*](http://www.ourmigrationstory.org.uk/oms/put-a-curse-on-my-enemies-meir-ben-elijah-and-the-jews-of-early-norwich) *written by Professor Anthony Bale, Medieval Studies, Deputy Dean (Arts) and Assistant Dean (Arts Research), Birkbeck, University of London*