

Bristol's 18th-century Jewish community

By a neat irony, the Jews' first public synagogue in the city since 1290 was located in Temple Street in the former residence of Sir John Knight the elder, an avowed enemy of Quakers and Catholics (and uncle to the anti-alien campaigner, Sir John Knight the younger). By 1766 Bishop Newton recorded a total of 42 Jews in the city, 40 of whom lived in Temple. Whilst the synagogue provided the focus for most of the community, there were others who must have assimilated into society at large. However, very few Jews seem to have formally converted to the Church of England, if the baptismal records are trustworthy. A young French Jew, the silver and goldsmith Abraham Barnard, seems to have been baptised at St Nicholas church in 1758, although he was still identified as a 'JEWeller' in a local row that began as a misunderstanding about Sunday observance.

Some Jewish men, such as Simon Vessels, a journeyman watchmaker, married non-Jewish women, which by Jewish law meant that their descendants would not be considered Jews. However, when the glassmaker Lazarus Jacobs married Mary Hiscocks from Temple Cloud in Somerset, their children were raised in the Hebrew congregation, suggesting that Mary had converted to Judaism.

Most Jews lived in the Temple, Redcliffe and St Thomas parishes until the end of the century. Because it is not always possible to distinguish Jews from Gentiles (non Jews) by their names, records such as rate books and directories are not an infallible source for tracing Bristol's Jews and their exclusion from apprenticeships and guilds also makes documenting their working lives more difficult.



House in Temple Street, Bristol, by Thomas L. Rowbotham or Hugh O'Neill (1821), used by the Jewish congregation in the mid-18th century.

References

Samuel, 64-65; BCRL, Braikenridge Collection, St James & St Paul's pt. 1, 81, St Philip's, 107; McGrath (1985), 47, 65-68; Anon. (1753), 10-11, 20; FFBj, 01/12/53, 29/12/53. Barnard: BRO, 'Lists of Contents of Wooden Boxes of Town Clerk's Correspondence' file for 1768 bundle 1 (11); FFBj, 13/01/70, 20/01/70; Cooper. FFBj, 18/02/58, 25/02/58; TNA, PROB 11/1144. Isaac Jacob, Oxford DNB.