

# Jews of Medieval Kingston

By Helen Moss

*In 2008, Helen gave an afternoon talk on this subject to Doroteinu. So that the fascinating material which she covered can be more widely shared with KLS members she records here some of the research which she has carried out.*

Who were the heathen of Heathen Street and when were they translated to Eden? This question worried me into research that established the existence of a small pre-expulsion Jewish community in Kingston in the 13<sup>th</sup> century.

The first heathen I found were witches, closely followed by Jews. No published works, however, mention a Jewry in Kingston, and the foremost Anglo-Jewish historical authority affirmed to me personally that there was none. How then had the tradition grown? Why should the earliest named street in Kingston be called Heathen Street without foundation?

The site would have been possible – on the outskirts of the town near a known medieval well and within easy reach of the possible castle guarding the London Road/Eden Street junction. Jew and castle were mutually supporting: as the king's personal property valuable for frequent extortion of special taxes, Jews could take refuge in the local castle in times of trouble when they were often scapegoats. At York, Lincoln and Kingston-upon-Hull the Jewry and the castle were close.

The most recent addition to the circumstantial evidence for a medieval Jewry in Eden Street is the excavation of a pottery in Fairfield Road. Again, a pottery was a common adjunct of medieval Jewries because new cooking pots and crockery would be needed by the community every year at Passover, according to Jewish law. This guaranteed market was a good incentive to establish a pottery nearby.

Local records showed no medieval Jewish names of houses. A published general work revealed two 'Kingston' Jews who on further investigation proved to come from Kingston Bagpuize in Oxfordshire and Kingston-upon-Hull. But then the Public Records Office on the site of the old Domus Conversorum contains the Jewish Plea Rolls, records of domestic disputes, claims for debt and all kinds of legal negotiations; these were set aside from other legal papers since, as mentioned before, the Jews were the direct concern of the King. Here it was that I found the names of eight men and two women who lived at Kingston upon Thames between 1244 and 1290. This small number only means that the rest were not concerned in affairs that came before the Exchequer of the Jews.

Aaron and Solomon, both of Kingston upon Thames, in 1244 acknowledged receipt of 7 marks (1 mark = roughly £75 today) from Acer, Clerk, on account of a fine that he made with them for 10 marks of debt. Usury was a profitable business but risks were high; the usual rate of interest was 2% per week and it seems that medieval mathematicians were not always aware that this meant a debt doubling itself in two years. Even clergy, the educated few, were so often forced to pawn church plate etc. to make good debts owing, that special laws were passed to prevent the pawning of certain articles such as vestments, chalices and crosses to Jews. Solomon of Kingston is mentioned again in the same year acknowledging Quitclaim and Release to Henry of Kingston (Quitclaim = declare free of debt). Richard de Chilham and his wife Roysie were the next I found; in 1244-5 they were sued by Isaac of York regarding a covenant over the Manor of Kingston.

In 1266 the records tell a real story. Hugh de la Forde and Abelote, his wife, were attached to answer Saulot, a Jew of Kingston, 'touching a plea for the redelivery of 24 pieces of clothing, as well as linen as woollen, four linen cloths and half a quarter of meal, value 20/-, which he entrusted to them for safe-keeping and which they unlawfully detain.' The defendants state that they never received the goods, but that without their knowledge and while they were at church, the goods were hidden at their house, where on return home they found them. The verdict was in favour of the defendants. This certainly suggests a story: why were the goods left in the first place? It shows that Jews and gentiles called on, and trusted, each other. The

value of the items listed was considerable bearing in mind that 20/- is equivalent to about £100 today. We may wonder if Saulot's wife ever got her linen cloths back.

The next find was domestic. Isaac of Kingston was in dispute with Hugh de la Forde over a Will and with the verdict in his favour was awarded 1 Mark in 1268.

In 1272 a case is recorded that shows the privileged position of the Jews. Cresse, son of Gerta, sued Master Gilbert de Southwerke, Rector of the Schools at Kingston, for repayment of a debt and won the day. The fact that he dared indict such a worthy personage suggests that Cresse was very sure of his case.

Not all cases, however, were concerned with money. In 1276 Hake of Kingston and Abraham Grugga were sued for trespass and had to be 'mainperned' (that is, bailed) by their friends. In that year too, Aaron, son of Vives and the Jews of Kingston paid a fine of 4 Marks for 'trespass'.

These people are only names across the years, but there is one lady who stands out more clearly as an individual: Floria of Kingston. Jewish women in the 13<sup>th</sup> century held a comparatively free position in England. They are usually mentioned as joint owners of the houses they lived in with their husbands, and are frequently mentioned as partners in business transactions, which they sometimes even managed alone. It seems that ladies with a flair for business had the freedom to indulge it. Sometimes the son took his mother's name e.g. Cresse, son of Gerta, because she was better known than her husband. Girls seem to have been educated alongside their brothers, an unusual thing when Christian women were often little more than their husbands' chattels. Jewish ladies were as anxious then, as now, to be in fashion, and while their husbands and sons kept to names hallowed by the Bible, in the original Hebrew, or translated into Norman French (Hakelin = Isaac), they revelled in such glories as Alemantine, Contissa, Avigay, Duzelina, Gentil and Mirabella. Floria was a business woman in Kingston, probably a money lender, and one of the richest in the district. In 1276 she sold some money to the value of 67/6d and this money was later said to be clipped to the value of 40/-. Coin clipping was a common crime in Medieval England when coins contained their face value in precious metals: it consisted of trimming the edges off gold and silver coins and making new ones. The offence was possible because, as yet, there was little standardisation of money. The penalty for those convicted of the crime was hanging. In 1276 there was a big drive against offenders and Jews were involved, but Floria escaped scandal and worse; in 1277 she made a present to the King of 40/- (conscience money?) and in 1289 she was granted the residue of her late husband (Miles of Kingston, son of Jacob of London)'s fortune. To pay her 40/- (£200) to the King and to fight for her husband's fortune and win it, she must have been a lady of some influence and determination.

Those Jews I discovered seem to have been quite ordinary people; I have found no great rogues or scholars amongst them. Those that came to my notice were those with Kingston as part of their name and links with this part of England, but there were probably many others here. Names are also interesting for another reason; according to law Jews were only allowed to be money lenders etc. but we found Abraham le Peysoner, i.e. the fishmonger; Isaac le Ronmanger (ironmonger); John the Jew, Sergeant at Arms (soldier). There were other sources for surnames too: e.g. Moses Cumnaso (Nosy Moses); Manasser Grassus (Fat Manasser) and Duedone Pedibus Tortis (Bandy-legged Elkanan). Men with such names, giving no clue to where they came from, must also have lived in Kingston but we have no way of finding them. Only one Jew ever achieved the honour of being elected to a Guild: Benedict of Winchester, a goldsmith, in 1236.

History throws only exceptions into relief; the rest sink back in shadow. Only those who for some reason came before the Court, incurred the Royal Pleasure or Displeasure, did some heroic or infamous deed, or achieved outstanding honours, are remembered by name. Those too poor to pay the basic levy demanded of all Jews with any accountable possessions were estimated to be one-third of the community; they must have lived as servants, labourers and so on. Of the estimated 2000 Jews in England in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, only about 400 were really well off, and 1600 were expelled in 1290, milked dry of their money by too frequent taxes. Those not chronicled by name probably made up the majority of the community at Kingston.

Even those remembered did nothing spectacular, but how many of us will be remembered in 700 years time?