

A conversation with Rabbi Mendy Singer and Alex Schlesinger, President of the Park Row Synagogue.

Alex is a long-standing member of Bristol's Jewish community, even his birth certificate indicates he was born at 9, Park Row, the same address as the synagogue where his parents were once caretakers in the late 1940s.

Mendy is a relatively recent arrival to the city, with one of his first residences in 2015 being 33, Jacob's Wells Road. The landlord of 33, Jacob's Wells Road had been keen to have a Jewish tenant at this address and coincidentally, it is about this particular property that we have all met to discuss.

Before there were numbers 31 and 35 on either side, before it was a dwelling, and even before the street was named Jacob's Wells Road, this was a special place.

33, Jacob's Wells Road is the site of Jacob's Well; a medieval water feature that was discovered by chance in the 1990s during building works, and along with the uncovering of the well came another discovery. A Hebrew inscription had been revealed – Sochalim (which can be translated as 'flowing') – a reference to the water from the well, carved into a stone lintel, and arguably the oldest



Medieval map produced by Year 5 from St Michael on the Mount CEVC Primary School and Carmen Garaghon

remains of written Hebrew in Europe. We know that there was a Jewish community in Bristol before their expulsion from England in 1290 and we now know that Jacob's Well played an important role in their rituals, traditions and daily lives, but there is still some debate as to the exact nature of this role.

Rabbi Mendy believes this could have been the site of the Mikveh; a place for ritual cleansing and of particular significance for women. Mendy explains that a Mikveh underpins a Jewish community. It is an integral component "a priority for communal life...without a Mikveh, family life for observant Jews would be impossible." So vital that he cites a precedent of selling a precious Torah scroll (a handwritten version of the holiest book in Judaism) to fund the building of a Mikveh.

Mendy explains that it is not public; no one should know women are going there. But, Alex thinks it unlikely for women to have walked alone, through wooded Clifton some distance from the early Jewish neighbourhood, situated around what is now Wine Street and Nelson Street to a Mikveh which is necessarily secluded and private. Both were on the outskirts, Wine Street just inside and Nelson Street outside the town walls, at a time when Jews were considered to be the property of the king and required the king's permission to move. Alex, with his interest in Bristol's history reveals that Nelson Street was previously named The Jewry and the synagogue was in the disused crypt of St Giles (demolished 1328 and disused by the 1200s therefore predating the expulsion of the Jews) and some distance from Jacob's Well.

Alex considers the close proximity of the old Jewish cemetery, now underneath Queen Elizabeth Hospital (QEH) independent school (at its current site at the top of Jacob's Wells Road since 1847) and thinks that the well is much more likely to have been a Beth Tohorah; a place for preparing the dead.

Mendy explains that Jewish cemeteries were often one of the first things to be built after acquiring land, but Alex points out that, as with most early settlements, cemeteries would have been on the outskirts, away from the everyday toing and froing, away from the busy workings of a community, away from the living. Whilst there may be some question about the nature of this site and the role it played for Bristol's medieval Jewish populace, there is no doubt that it was an important place, identified possibly a millennium ago by a craftsman, a scribe etching his message into the stone lintel to remain in perpetuity.



Rabbi Mendy Singer and Alex Schlesinger,
President of the Park Row Synagogue