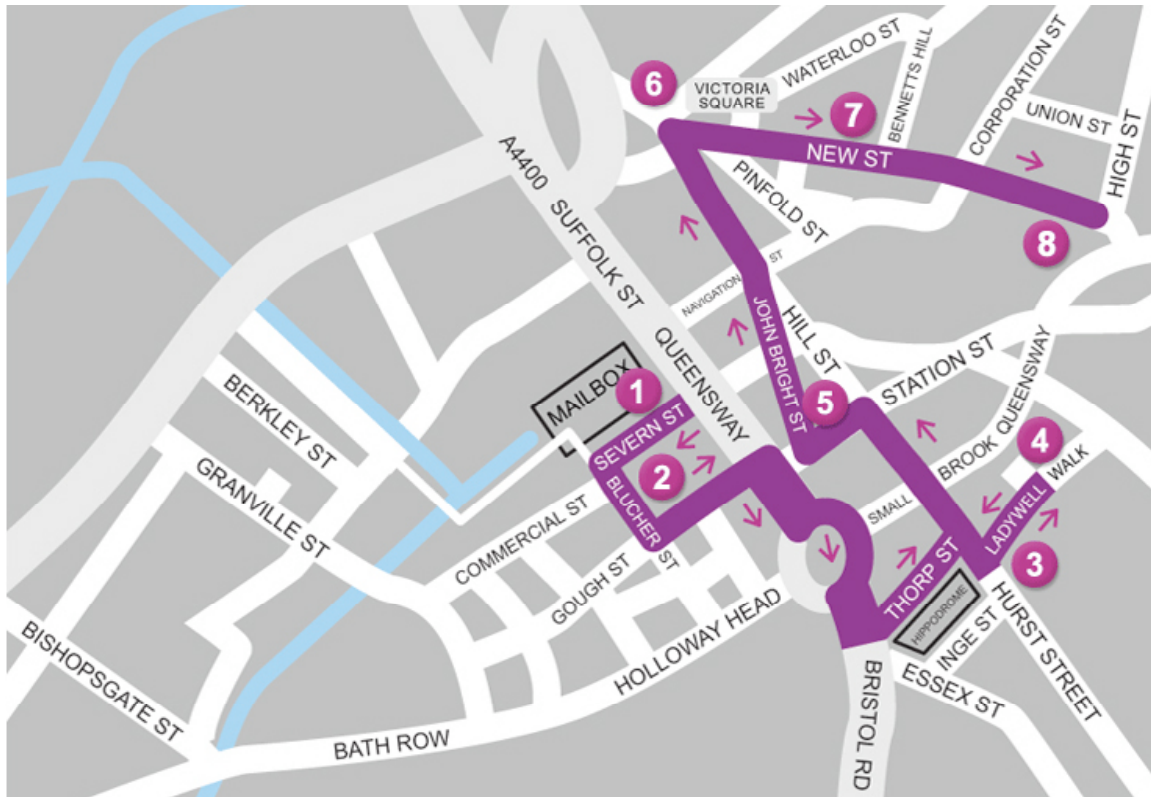


CONNECTING HISTORIES

City Trail

The Jewish Trail



1. Severn Street Synagogue
2. Singers Hill Synagogue
3. Hurst Street
4. Wrottesley Street Synagogue
5. Alexandra Theatre
6. Victoria Square
7. Bennetts Hill
8. New Street – Odeon Cinema

Meet on the steps outside the Mailbox facing Suffolk St Queensway

Turn right and walk up Severn St, stopping opposite the Masonic Hall on Severn St, which is about half-way up the street on your left.

1. Severn St Synagogue

The Jewish community was expelled from England at the end of the 13th century and was not readmitted until 1656. The earliest evidence for a Jewish presence in Birmingham comes from the 18th century: there are some Jewish names in trade directories and by 1766, the community had bought land for a cemetery.

The oldest surviving synagogues in Birmingham can be found in the old Jewish quarter around Hurst St and Holloway Head. Early descriptions of Birmingham's Jews say that they were artisans: pencil-makers, button and buckle makers, watchmakers and tailors; or pedlars who travelled around the countryside outside the city selling jewellery and metalwork. On Fridays, they would come back home to celebrate the Jewish holy day, the Sabbath, which begins on Friday evening and lasts until Saturday evening.

Their synagogue, in a damp and poor area of the city called 'The Froggery' is described by the Birmingham historian William Hutton, writing in 1780: 'In the synagogue, situated in the Froggery, they still preserve the faint resemblance of their ancient worship. Their whole appurtenances being no more than the drooping ensigns of poverty. The place is rather small, but tolerably well filled where there appears less decorum than in the Christian churches.' He also says that 'their society is almost entirely confined to themselves, except in the commercial line'. No trace of the Froggery and its buildings now survives; the area was destroyed to make way for New Street Station.

The oldest surviving synagogue building in Birmingham is the Severn St synagogue, which was dedicated on 23 September 1809 and enlarged in 1827. In 1871, during alterations to the building, the original foundation stone was discovered. A plaque attached to it listed the names of the five principal men of the Congregation: David, son of Solomon, Judah, son of Coleman, Solomon, son of Mordecai, Jacob, son of Samuel, and Moses, son of Lyon.

The first Hebrew School was held in the vestry of this building between 1840 and 1843, until the Birmingham Hebrew Congregation was able to raise enough money for a separate building in Lower Hurst St.

Walk up the hill and turn left onto Blucher St. Singers Hill Synagogue is the Victorian red-brick building on your left, behind a fence of metal railings.

2. Singers Hill Synagogue

In 1856, the Congregation sold Severn St Synagogue, and moved up the hill to the grander surroundings of Singers Hill Synagogue. Singers Hill was designed by the architect Henry Yeoville Thomason, who went on to design the Council House. Shortly after it was finished, the synagogue was described in the local press as 'a glory to the community and an ornament to the town'. A letter written at the time of the opening of the synagogue describes the consecration ceremony like this: 'I should judge there were about 1500 people in the buildings a little after one o'clock, a beautiful canopy and four supporting gentlemen were at the entrance of the Shool [synagogue] door when the Chief Rabbi said: "Open unto me the Gates of Righteousness, I will go unto them and I will praise the Lord" (Psalm 118, Verse 19). Then the Wardens and gentlemen made a procession seven times round the altar, each bearing a scroll of the Law, the organ playing most solemnly and the choristers singing. Heavenly, not a whisper was heard. Then Dr Adler from the pulpit gave a beautiful lecture. His text was from the psalms, I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.'

The Birmingham Hebrew School met in a room behind the synagogue from 1856 until the 1930s, and acquired a second school building round the corner from the synagogue in 1899, now Trefoil House. In the 1930s, the Congregation raised money for a purpose-built school in St Luke's Rd and this building was sold. The old schoolroom is now part of the Joseph Cohen Hall, which is still used for events.

Continue down Blucher St. Turn left down Gough St, then right along Suffolk St Queensway. Cross over the pedestrian crossing on the roundabout and turn into Smallbrook Queensway. There is a set of traffic lights and a pedestrian crossing on your right, in front of the Radisson Hotel. Use this pedestrian crossing, then turn right, passing Scala House (don't go into the subway). Take the first left onto Thorp St and turn right onto Hurst St. Stop in front of the Hippodrome Theatre.

3. Hurst Street

Hurst St was well-known as a Jewish street in the 19th and 20th centuries and there have been many Jewish buildings here at various times including two synagogues, a mikveh (ritual immersion pool), a school, and many shops and private homes.

Kelly's directory (the 19th century equivalent of today's Yellow Pages) reveals several possible Jewish names and occupations in the buildings on Hurst St in 1890:

East side

4	Joseph King, watchmaker
8	Confidential Loan and Advance Company (Samuel Edward Marks, manager)
13	Hyman Lyons, pawnbroker
30	Jacob Moore, bird dealer
35 1/2	Jacob Harris, slipper maker
47	Fanny Raphael, second hand clothes dealer

West side

62	Marcus Myers, glazier
63 1/2	Henry Samuel Ansell, watch case maker
64	Joseph Hyman Carter, basket maker
73	Solomon Harris, second hand clothes dealer
81	Lawrence Hyman Davis, tobacconist
89	Isaac Greenberg, tailor

The first Hebrew School building was in Lower Hurst St. It was set up by a group of prominent local Jews, who thought that 'it was a pity that a school was not in existence for the Hebrew children, who seemed to be wandering about entirely at the mercy of circumstances, without any means of having their ideas properly formed'. When the school opened in 1843, there was an elaborate opening ceremony, which was attended by many important people in the town and was followed by a celebration dinner. The school moved to a building next to the new Singers Hill synagogue in 1856.

A Jewish family lived in one of the Back to Back houses on Inge St, now owned by the National Trust. Their house has been furnished to show how it might have looked on a Sabbath evening in the 1850s.

Turn right down Ladywell Walk, cross over the road, and stop outside the Chung Ying Chinese restaurant.

4. Wrottesley St

The Chung Ying restaurant on the corner of Wrottesley St and Ladywell Walk has been used as a synagogue twice: between 1853 and 1856, and from 1901 and 1928. It is the ancestor of the Central Synagogue on the Pershore Road.

In 1853, a group of about ninety members left Singers Hill Synagogue complaining about the 'supremacy of money', that 'poor Jews worshipped on sufferance', and about the 'dictatorial airs' of David Barnett, one of the leading members of the Congregation. They held services in Wrottesley St for three years, but were persuaded to return to Singers Hill in 1856 when the system for collecting membership payments was revised.

The second split in the Congregation, which happened at the end of the 19th century, was permanent. At this time, many Jews were coming to Birmingham from Central and Eastern Europe. They found Singers Hill, which was known as 'the Englische schule' (synagogue) very different from the synagogues they were used to, and around 1900, a small group left Singers Hill and set up the Wrottesley St Beth Hamedrash, which became known as 'the immigrants' synagogue'.

The governing council of Singers Hill gave financial support to the synagogue, but for many years, the Beth Hamedrash was required to apply to them annually for permission to hold services and they were not allowed to employ a Mohel (who performs circumcisions) or a Schohet (kosher butcher).

Walk back up Ladywell Walk, turn right onto Hurst St and walk back to Smallbrook Queensway. Use the pedestrian crossing and walk up Hill St. Cross over to the left hand side of the street at the zebra crossing by the Crown pub, then turn into Station St, which bends round to the right and turns into John Bright St. Stop opposite the back entrance to the Alexandra Theatre on John Bright St.

5. Alexandra Theatre

The Alexandra Theatre, one of the most popular in the city, was bought by Leon Salberg in 1911. At first, the theatre presented reviews and dramas, but later, it formed its own repertory company which put on a different play every week, some presented twice nightly.

'Three thousand people booked weekly, week in, week out. People would give up their holidays for an Alex production, people married who met at the Alex.'

The theatre building was remodelled in 1934 in order to compete with the newly-established picture houses. Leon Salberg made the Alex available to several different groups in the Jewish community. Scenery from the Alex was lent to the Jewish Arts Society for their shows; they also performed at the Alex during the 1920s. The schoolchildren of the Hebrew School visited the Alex every year for their annual treat.

Leon Salberg was very active in the affairs of Singers Hill synagogue. One of his particular interests was the cemeteries: his son recalled that 'he was responsible for the transformation of Witton Cemetery from a shambles...and every Sunday he went to some meeting connected with the synagogue or Jewish charities.' After his death in 1936, his son Derek managed the Alex. His book *My Love Affair with a Theatre* is available in Local Studies, Birmingham Central Library.

Walk down John Bright St to the junction with Hill St. Walk up Hill St and bear right into Victoria Square. Stop near the Council House.

6. Victoria Square

As the centre of local government in Birmingham, Victoria Square is a good setting to talk about campaigns for Jewish civil rights.

The first Jew to serve on the Birmingham Town Council was called David Barnett, elected in 1839. He was a prominent member of the Jewish community and active in local politics in the city, serving on the Board of the Queen Elizabeth Hospital, the Jewish Board of Guardians, and many of the Committees that managed the affairs of his synagogue. He was one of several members of the Congregation who set up the Birmingham Hebrew School. His election was an important moment in Birmingham's history. Town Councillors were required by law to swear an oath of allegiance 'on the true faith of a Christian'. David Barnett, as a Jew, could not take this oath. However, after some discussion, 'the Council allowed that Mr Barnett take the declaration conscientiously with the omission of the words, for his religion strictly commanded Israelites that wherever they might be, they were duty bound to support the establishment of that country.' Although David Barnett was elected in 1839, a bill permitting Jews to hold municipal office was not passed until 1845, and almost twenty years passed before, in 1858, Lionel de Rothschild became the first Jewish MP to take his seat in Parliament, swearing the oath "So help me, Jehovah".

The Council House was designed by the Birmingham architect Henry Yeoville Thomason, who, earlier in his career had built Singers Hill Synagogue.

*Walk away from Victoria Square down New St and turn left on Bennetts Hill.
Stop at no 11, on the left side of the street.*

7. Bennetts Hill

10, Bennetts Hill was the home and business premises of David Barnett, who was a jewellery merchant. He lived there with his business partner Samuel Neustadt and their families. Some of the Victorian buildings on this street have disappeared, but you can still see a blue plaque marking the site of no 11 which was the birthplace of the artist Sir Edward Burne-Jones. When he was a child in the 1830s, the young Edward was close friends with the children next door; his mother's memoirs include descriptions of life in the Neustadt/Barnett household.

'The household was a Jewish one, and almost patriarchal in character; for the two partners of a firm of merchants established in Birmingham, Messrs. Neustadt and Barnett, had married two sisters, and both families including children, a widowed mother, and a maiden aunt, lived together under the same roof...They shared all their pleasures and amusements with [Edward], nor was he excluded even from their holy days and festivals. At the Feast of Purim he dressed up with the other children, and was so eager for the merry-making that when the day came round, he was always the first guest to arrive.'

Bertram Silverston, who was Chairman of the Congregation's governing Council and a Trustee in the 1920s - 1940s, lived at 16 Bennetts Hill.

Walk back down Bennetts Hill and turn left onto New Street. Walk down New Street looking for the Odeon cinema on your right and stop outside.

8. New St Odeon Cinema

The Odeon cinema chain, whose distinctive art deco sign is a familiar sight on most high streets, was created by Oscar Deutsch, who was born into a Jewish family from Balsall Heath in 1893.

His cinema chain, which was famous for its innovative architecture and lavish interiors, brought a touch of luxury to all. It grew rapidly: there were 26 Odeons in 1933 and 250 in 1937. The word Odeon was said to stand for 'Oscar Deutsch Entertains Our Nation' and its sign was designed by the Birmingham firm Pearce Signs.

Oscar Deutsch was the President of Singers Hill synagogue from 1932 until his death from cancer in 1941. During his term as President, the synagogue was extended, the Hebrew School was moved to a new site and new offices and a community hall were built, using the same architect who designed some of his most famous cinema buildings, Harry Weedon. He set up the Jewish Representative Council, which brought Birmingham synagogues together to assist Jewish refugees. There is a stained glass window in his memory in Singers Hill synagogue.

This is the end of The Jewish Trail

Compiled by Anna Riggs, 2006

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Supported by the
Heritage Lottery Fund



Birmingham City Council