

HELPING PRINCES ROAD SYNAGOGUE CELEBRATE 150TH ANNIVERSARY

BY LAWRENCE JOFFE

ALIGHTING at Lime Street Station, one soon realises that Liverpool is a city of extraordinary history.

Recovering from the shock of not installing an English-Scouse translation app, and then finding the ear adjusts well enough, helped by the remarkable friendliness of locals, I learned that this was the site of the world's first railway line, in 1830.

Lime Street also became an early area of settlement for disembarking Jewish immigrants.

In fact, the Jewish history of Liverpool was what brought me to this city last weekend.

Liverpool, home to The Beatles and once the busiest port in the British Empire, also contains the still-operating Princes Road Synagogue, now celebrating 150 years since its founding.

The neo-Gothic and Moorish building has been praised as the most beautiful synagogue in Britain. And the community in general was the first and largest major provincial centre outside London.

Marking this happy anniversary occasion, Princes Road has put on a rich variety of events, academic, musical and endlessly intriguing.

Last weekend featured Commemoration Sunday and Monday, so the flavour was themed around memories of the world wars.

That said, the first event focused on the grand Athenaeum private members club, which, since its foundation in 1797, always accepted Jewish members.

Liverpool lawyer Robin Makin, a key figure in the Jewish community, led the tour, which included a staircase wall full of political portraits.

One shows William Huskisson, rising statesman whose career was rudely ended when he became the world's first railway casualty — in Lime Street, 1830.

Of particular interest was the Reading Room where grandees devoured the latest news, hot off the press — essential for businessmen hoping to glean market trends before competitors, like a proto-internet, explained Robin.

After lunch attendees returned to the Athenaeum for two fascinating historical presentations, the first by Rabbi Ariel Abel, former minister at Princes Road, replete in his khaki uniform and dog collar, as befitting a British Jewish military chaplain.

Rediscovering city's rich Jewish history



DISCUSSION: Robin Makin and Dame Louise Ellman at the Athenaeum

He spoke about his research into past Liverpool Jewish luminaries, including a leading lady of Sephardi origin, surnamed Aboab.

Robin followed with an equally engrossing description of Jewish high society, including Charles Mozley, who was the first Jewish mayor of Liverpool.

Following that was a wide-ranging and thoroughly enjoyable discussion with three locally connected Jewish politicians, former Liberal MP Evan Harris, former Labour MP Dame Louise Ellman, and current Conservative Peer Lord Wolfson of Tredegar.

Despite ideological chasms, their mutual affability was infectious.

Topics ranged from anti-semitism, Liverpool's unique spirit to attitudes to faith, minority populations, fortunes won and lost... and (from Davis) a slew of Woody Allen jokes.

Monday morning began with a visit to Broadgreen Cemetery, with community member Alaster Burman as the expert guide.

Death, they say, is the great leveller. True, the graveyard serves as a living history honouring the great and the good.

For instance, buried in the same grave as his wife May is Louis Samuel Cohen, 1840-1922, co-founder and chief executive of Lewis's.

Cohen, we learned, was the first Jew to be Lord Mayor of Liverpool in 1899-1900. Another who followed in his mayoral footsteps was Liberal politician Cyril Carr.

Not far away lies the venerable and eccentric Lord Bertram Benas, a brilliant community historian and legal expert who famously wore full frockcoat on Kol Nidre evening.

Our visit proved that less known figures also have remarkable sto-

ries to tell. Take for instance Olga 'Pearl' Ancona, born in Aleppo, Syria, in 1918.

Described as a teacher and healer, she survived Auschwitz, lived in Italy and died in Liverpool in 2011. "Cia, Bella" is the fond message on her gravestone.

Another shows Eric Geoffrey Goldrein, a war hero who lost limbs yet remained passionately engaging all his life. "A good egg" is his stone's motto.

Broadgreen cherishes ties to the broader community as well. Alaster proudly explained how the cemetery co-operates with local beekeepers to preserve the environment — which inter alia maintains the cemetery.

In 2021 Broadgreen opened to the public and non-Jewish neighbours joined the tour we were on, to honour the lost in the First World War.

Many Jews buried here bravely served in His Majesty's Armed Forces; the ohel hall even features one of only three serving military grave markers in Britain.

That afternoon appropriately highlighted the theme of war and peace. Located at Princes Road itself, it began with an illustrated exposition titled "The Art of War — Patriotism and Propaganda in Liverpool 1853-1918" delivered by Dr Lee R Kendall.

One moving display was the giant and handsomely painted plaque commemorating Princes Road congregants who served in the Great War.

By way of contrast, Dr Jonathan Lewis, a member of the Jewish Historical Society, vividly outlined the sad story of Rev John Harris, who lost his rabbinical post at Princes Road over his determined and principled opposition to war.

Rev Harris went on to found the Jewish Peace Society, and served as rabbi in smaller congregations in London. But his career never fully recovered, despite backing from many congregants.

My own interest in Liverpool stems from research into the late former community archivist, Karl Louis Abrahams.

Since he died in 1980, it was discovered that this mild-mannered man was part of the wartime intelligence unit that captured and interrogated Rudolf Höss, founding commandant of Auschwitz, arguably the worst mass murderer in history.

A book is in progress with Nigel Canin, of Lemon Soul Books, as the publisher.

After the final event, Robin took Nigel and me on an impromptu unofficial tour of Jewish heritage through central Liverpool.

The route began in Princes Road, with its synagogue and two nearby churches, past Georgian mansions which looked especially handsome and alluring in the moonlight. They once housed cotton barons and their families, including Jewish ones like the Mozleys.

Wending down cobbled streets

past the arts college where two of the Beatles studied, and a statue honouring a famous pair of archbishop friends, one Catholic, the other Protestant, we approached the site of the former Hope Street Synagogue. The building was built in 1837 and was home to the (then) New Hebrew Congregation.

Adjoining it stands what once was Hope Place Hebrew School, which educated generations of students, Jewish and gentle alike. Today the site lives on as the Unity Theatre.

Robin hopes to turn the trail into a fuller walking tour; and Nigel and I were happy to be his guinea pigs.

Unexpected highlights included the Jacob Epstein statue, Liverpool Resurgent, on a plinth above the majestic, Jewish-founded and much loved department store, Lewis's.

Others were the square where a younger Robin acted as a yeshiva-bocher extra next to Barbara Streisand in the port departure scene from the 1982 film *Yentl*.

Nor will we forget the bustling corner where the esteemed Anglo-Jewish banking and political Samuels family set up their jewellery business two centuries ago.

Amusingly, the current occupant is a fast-food halal eatery rejoicing in the name Bazooka Chicken.

Several more Princes Road 150 events are in store. It's a perfect excuse to visit a city full of life, places to visit, whether your inclinations are Beatles, football, or the delights of Albert Dock — and, of course, the history of particularly proud and intriguing, if diminishing, Jewish community.

SOUTH Africa-born Lawrence Joffe has been a researcher, journalist, press officer, reviewer and director of a small group related to Israel. He has written books, most recently including *An Illustrated Guide to Jewish History and Abandoned Sacred Places*. He assisted the writing of *A Wing and a Prayer*, the late Rev Malcolm Weisman's autobiography. Currently he is writing a book about Karl Louis Abrahams.



PANEL: Lord Wolfson of Tredegar, Dr Evan Harris, Athenaeum chairman Roger Phillips, Robin Makin and Rabbi Ariel Abel



TOUR: Alaster Burman leads the tour of Broadgreen Cemetery