

# 20. jewish london

The history of the Jews in London is a long and complicated one. The city's first sizeable Jewish community was established off Cheapside in the late 11th century, when refugees from French pogroms settled in the capital to boost the fledgling Norman economy. Barely 200 years later, they were gone – expelled from England by King Edward I on the back of rampant anti-semitism. For the next 350 years, Judaism was equivalent to witchcraft in the popular imagination; and when Jews did begin resettling in London, they were met with suspicion and hostility. The traditionally Jewish areas of the East End have long been abandoned in favour of more affluent northern suburbs but, as befits their status as one of the city's longest-established ethnic groups, the Jewish community has left its mark throughout the capital.



**Start point:** Golders Green tube

**End point:** Camden Town tube

**Duration:** 5 hours

● Exit **Golders Green tube**, turn right and walk along the path to the right of the small parade of shops. You will emerge alongside an enclosed section of road, which has **Golders Green Station** bus stop on the far side. For a brief tour of north London's most prosperous Jewish suburbs, take the **H2** from here. This bus, which begins and terminates at this stop, first heads down **Golders Green Road**, the district's main thoroughfare, upon which you'll see Jewish restaurants, kosher burger bars and beigel bakeries amid the high-street chains. Jews began settling in Golders Green and the surrounding districts in the early 20th century, when the Charing Cross, Euston and Hampstead Railway built an underground train line out to this part of northwest London – already known for its Jewish cemetery. This gave wealthy East End Jews the option of bringing up families in suburbia while still maintaining businesses close to the City.

● After turning up Hoop Lane, the bus passes **Golders Green Jewish Cemetery** on the left. Reform Jews (those who believe in modern and liberal interpretations of the Torah and Jewish traditions) are buried on western side. The eastern side of the cemetery is reserved for orthodox Sephardic Jews (those who can trace their ancestry back to 15th-century Jewish communities in Spain and Portugal), who are buried in flat graves with their feet pointing towards Jerusalem. The cemetery, which opened in 1895, is the final resting place of cellist Jacqueline du Pré, who converted to Judaism in 1967.

● **Golders Green Crematorium**, directly opposite the cemetery, was opened in 1902. Despite being totally

secular, it is where many notable British-based Jews – including Sigmund Freud, Amy Winehouse and Mark Bolan – have chosen to be cremated. The ashes of Gentiles Enid Blyton, Keith Moon and Bram Stoker, among others, are scattered in beautifully landscaped gardens behind.

● The remainder of the bus journey is spent meandering around Hampstead Garden Suburb. With its neat housing, ornamental gardens and somewhat twee open spaces, this early 20th-century piece of idealistic urban planning is more Stepford than Sephardic. Its large Jewish population, though, is a reminder of how far London's Jews have come since the days in which they were based in the poverty-stricken slums of the East End. These streets have some of the highest property prices in the capital, and the people who live here are at the top of the capital's economic tree.

● When the bus returns to the **Golders Green Station** stop, get off and walk back to the tube station entrance. Catch the southbound **13** from the bus station in front of the forecourt and take it all the way into central London. Get off at the **Aldwych/Drury Lane** terminus, continue walking around Aldwych and along Fleet Street, then turn left up Chancery Lane. The Maughan Library, on your right, is built on the site of the medieval **Domus Conversorum** (House of the Converts), which was established in 1253 to encourage Jews to convert to Christianity. When King Edward I formally expelled all Jews from England in 1290, conversion became the only way to remain in the country. But as acknowledging Christ meant all property and assets had to be forfeited to the state, those who did decide to stay were forced to take up residence here and live a life of destitution. Unsurprisingly, only a very small number of Jews took

this deal; most preferred to leave the country or practice their religion in secret.

- Carry on walking up Chancery Lane, turn left at the top and cross the road to the **Brownlow Street** stop. Catch the eastbound **25**, which heads down High Holborn and past Hatton Garden on the left. London's diamond and jewellery trade, centred around this street since medieval times, has been dominated by Orthodox Jews since Oliver Cromwell readmitted Judaism to England in 1656. The Lord Protector was desperate to attract Jewish diamond dealers from Antwerp to London to boost an ailing economy and generate lucrative taxes.

- When the bus goes along Cheapside and Poultry, look to the left for **Old Jewry**, which marks the entrance to London's original Jewish ghetto – that stretched as far as St Giles Without Cripplegate in the north to Poultry in the south. William the Conqueror installed survivors of the Rouen pogrom here in 1096 as he needed money-lenders to help make his new kingdom more prosperous (the medieval Church forbade Christians from lending money at interest). Even though this trade was imposed on the Jewish community, the riches it brought led to Jews being resented – especially in times of hardship – and this often spilled over into anti-semitic violence. Old Jewry was the scene of a brutal pogrom in 1189, when Londoners – acting on a rumour that King Richard I had ordered a massacre of the Jews – set fire to Jewish houses, and killed those fleeing the flames.

- Get off the bus at the **St Katherine Cree** stop, and continue along Leadenhall Street and St Botolph Street. Turn left into Duke's Place and follow the road along until it becomes Bevis Marks. **Bevis Marks Synagogue**, on the left, was built by London's new Sephardic community in 1701. It is the oldest synagogue in the UK. The spiritual and administrative heart of Judaism in the English-speaking world for centuries, it houses a stunning Renaissance-style oak ark that holds the Torah scrolls.

- Walk back down Bevis Marks and Duke's Place, and turn left into St Botolph Street. Cross Houndsditch and turn left up Middlesex Street, then right into **Goulston Street**. It was in the doorway to number 108 that the Goulston Street graffito – which read 'the Juwes [sic] are the men that will not be blamed for nothing' – was found in 1888, scrawled above a piece of bloodstained apron belonging to Jack the Ripper's fourth victim Catherine Eddowes. As anti-semitic feeling was running high in the East End, in part due to suspicions that local Jewish cobbler John Pizer was responsible for the Whitechapel murders, police washed away the writing almost immediately. Detectives were divided over whether the graffito had anything to do with the case. While some felt it was a message from the murderer that required greater interpretation, others saw it as just another expression of East End anti-Jewish feeling that happened to be where the criminal had flung the incriminating cloth.

- Return to Middlesex Street, turn right and walk up to Cobb Street. Turn right here, left up Bell Street and right into **Brune Street**. The Soup Kitchen for the Jewish

Poor, on the left, was established in 1854 to feed impoverished Russian Jews who flocked into London at this time to escape pogroms in the east. Whitechapel and Spitalfields were desperately poor areas in the 19th century, and this building is a potent reminder that Jews were at the very bottom of the pile.

- Retrace your steps to Middlesex Street then turn right and follow the road along Petticoat Lane Market onto Bishopsgate. Cross the road, turn left and catch the northbound **8** from the **Liverpool Street Station** stop. Get off at the **Brick Lane** stop, carry on walking along Bethnal Green Road and turn right down Brick Lane. Though this road is now known for its Bangladeshi population, it used to be the heart of Jewish Spitalfields. You'll see remnants of this immediately to the right – the Brick Lane Beigel Bake and Britain's First & Best Beigel Shop, established in 1855, form a tiny Jewish enclave amid the curry houses and sari shops of Banglatown.

- Continue down Brick Lane, passing the London Jamme Masjid mosque that occupies the former Spitalfields Great Synagogue. Walk all the way down to Whitechapel Road and turn right to see the wonderfully ornate star of David above the door of Albert's men's outfitters at number 88. Part of the logo for a Jewish newspaper that operated from these premises in the 1920s, it remained on the wall after the publication closed and the Jewish community left the East End behind.

- Turn around and walk back up Whitechapel Road to the **Osborn Street** bus stop. Catch the northbound **254**, which takes you up through Hackney and Clapton to **Stamford Hill** – home to the largest Orthodox Jewish community outside of Israel and the US. Here you will see Ashkenazi Jews (descended from the medieval Jewish communities around the River Rhine in Germany) in the traditional dress of fur hats, black coats and white stockings. Many businesses are run by and cater to the local Jewish population, and several stores specialise in disposable cooking, eating and food storage implements, as the predominantly Hasidic population are forbidden from cooking and washing-up on the Sabbath. The area welcomed its first Jewish residents in the 1880s, as Ashkenazi Jews sought to escape the East End slums. Once the Union of Orthodox Hebrew Congregations was established in Stamford Hill in 1926 with the aim of protecting traditional Judaism, the area became a magnet for Orthodox and Hasidic families.

- Get off the bus at the **Stamford Hill Broadway** stop and catch the westbound **253** from the same stop. This bus takes you to Camden Town – home of the **Jewish Museum London**, dedicated to the British-Jewish experience. Several hands-on exhibits, including a recreation of a Jewish East End tailor's shop and a Yiddish karaoke booth, make the museum as fun an experience as an educational one; and exhibitions on British-Jewish life and the impact of the Holocaust are both enlightening and moving. To get to the museum, get off the 253 at the **Camden Town Station** stop and walk back to Camden Road. Turn right, cross at the lights and walk up Parkway, then turn left onto Albert Street. The museum is on the right.