

# Rickie Burman, Interviewed by Michael Shapland

*Rickie Burman, President of the Association of European Jewish Museums, has a background in archaeology and anthropology and was involved in setting up the Manchester Jewish Museum. She is presently Director of the London Jewish Museum which reopened in 2010 after extensive refurbishment.*

*She was interviewed by Michael Shapland in February 2011.*

***Could you tell me a little about the history and collections of the London Jewish Museum?***

When the Museum was founded, back in 1932, there was a concern both to collect and to preserve outstanding objects of Jewish heritage, in particular Jewish religious items, and to be a place where people who were not Jewish could come to learn about Jewish history. We have an outstanding collection of Jewish ceremonial objects, for which we have been awarded Designated Status in order to recognise the collection as an important part of the nation's heritage. The Museum reflects the founders' original intention of collecting objects of outstanding historic and aesthetic merit; they were particularly keen to obtain items relating to the history of the Jewish community, but at that time they tended to emphasise institutional rather than social history.

In 1995 the Jewish Museum amalgamated with the former London Museum of Jewish Life, which started life in 1984 as a museum of the Jewish East End of London. Its aims were to complement the collections of the Jewish Museum, and to collect Jewish social history material, mainly dating to the 19th and 20th centuries. In contrast, the old Jewish Museum only

collected objects over 100 years old. Initially the two collections remained in separate parts of London due to lack of a suitable site, but since 2010 everything has been brought together. It is now an integrated museum, reflecting social as well as religious life, the history of individuals as well as institutions.

***What would you say was the role of archaeology in the new museum?***

Archaeology comes into the story particularly well for the medieval period. The key archaeological exhibit we



*Fig 1  
The London Jewish Museum (Photo Michael Shapland)*

Fig 2

*The Mekveh (Photo The London Jewish Museum)*

*This is a pool filled with natural water such as a spring, well or river, built into the ground for ritual immersion; the Mekvah 'has offered a gateway to purity ever since the creation of man'*

have is the 13th-century *mikvah* (ritual bath) excavated in 2001 in the City of London by the Museum of London Archaeology Service. It has been conserved and reconstructed stone-by-stone in the museum. We also have potsherds and other finds from the house where the *mikvah* was excavated. From a wider perspective, our approach to telling the history of the Jewish people in Britain is also archaeological in the sense that we are using objects to tell the history of ordinary peoples' lives. We are the only museum in London devoted to people of a particular faith or background, and indeed the only Jewish museum in Europe which follows this approach.

***Do you think that archaeology can give a different perspective on the accepted narrative of Jewish life in Britain?***

We certainly have a different narrative here to that which would have been told in the old Jewish

Museum, since we focus not only on the important people but have a broader approach which looks at the wider experience of more ordinary Jewish people in their working lives, leisure activities and experiences of immigration. This emphasises the life stories of individual men and women, which is rather more difficult to approach archaeologically. However, one display concerns the possessions that a number of Jews chose to bring with them when they first came to Britain throughout the 20th century: the biographies of people through their possessions.

***Do you have much involvement with other British museums?***

We aim to involve ourselves as closely as possible with other heritage organisations and with the wider community, from the British Museum and the Museum of London to the Refugee Council and different faith organisations. Recently we have been involved with the Cultural Olympiad, which saw us interact with the Irish Traveller community and with disabled and homeless populations in Camden. They went on to make a film about their perspective on our collections. We hope to communicate understanding of Jewish society and faith to the wider population, and of course act as a focus for social identity within the Jewish community itself.

***Do you particularly value the older objects in the Museum, or is their religious significance paramount?***

Value is a very subjective concept and a very personal one, so if you spoke to different members of staff they would each value different items, and I do not think we would accord a greater value to an older object over one which is more recent. Personally, I am particularly attached to a banner made by the London Jewish Bakers' Society, which is very appealing and colourful as an artwork, as well as being a social object which is illustrative of a little-known aspect of Jewish communal life. On the other hand we have a magnificent 17th century walnut Torah Ark which was found in a castle in Northumbria, being used as a steward's wardrobe. But, as I say, valuing one object over another is very difficult, and we all have our favourites.

*Would such a concept extend to buildings – obviously the religious functions of a synagogue is primary, but does age or archaeological significant afford added value?*

I would say yes, since in society generally, and not just from a Jewish perspective, we value older and rarer things. The Bevis Marks synagogue in the City of London, built in 1701, is not only a beautiful building, but the fact that it is the oldest synagogue still functioning in the United Kingdom makes it particularly precious. In this respect, Judaism accords with the British mind-set. From a wider perspective, synagogues are valued architecturally and aesthetically since they are not in themselves a sacred space: what is important is the prayer that occurs within.

*So in this sense synagogues, perhaps unlike churches, are a vessel for worship rather than sacred places in themselves?*

I would say so, and that is a very interesting comparison to make, although I'm not myself an expert on the subject!

*When you were planning the museum's refurbishment, were you tempted to go down the route of the Manchester Jewish Museum, and base yourself inside or adjacent to an historic synagogue?*

The Manchester synagogue was actually redundant when we set up the museum, and we were very concerned with trying to save the building. I think both concepts, a dedicated museum space or one linked to a synagogue, work very well, and indeed the Manchester building is a local attraction in its own right. Internationally, Jewish museums are often based in synagogues, and my role as President of the Association of European Jewish Museums means that I visit a lot of museums and synagogues! Some museums have large synagogue complexes, for example the Jewish Historical Museum in Amsterdam, which has managed to turn adjacent buildings into very useful spaces whilst still preserving their character and feeling. However, in the case of the London Jewish Museum, the aspiration was to have a dedicated space which would concentrate not just on religious life, and being based in an historic building can result in

additional challenges such as the regulations around modifying listed structures and the limitations of such sites compared to a purpose-built gallery space.

*Can such conversions result in a tension between those who value the buildings for their religious functions, and tourists who may have little interest in religion at all?*

Jewish museums tend only to inhabit synagogues which have fallen out of use, so I think that the religious community would only be pleased to see these structures gain a positive use, as was the case in Manchester. Functioning synagogues, like the historic Bevis Marks in London, will often be open to visitors, but the demands of these buildings are obviously different.

The London Jewish Museum is located in Albert Street, Camden Town, North London. Its website is <http://www.jewishmuseum.org.uk/>

*Michael Shapland took his undergraduate degree in archaeology at the Institute of Archaeology, University College London, where he developed an interest in Anglo-Saxon society and the study of standing buildings. After a spell as an excavator and buildings archaeologist with the Museum of London Archaeology Service he was able to pursue both of these interests on the Archaeology of Buildings M.A. course at the University of York. The resulting research on the study of an Anglo-Saxon tower-chapel in Lincolnshire was published in the Archaeological Journal, and following a further spell as a buildings archaeologist in York this has led to Michael pursuing a PhD back at UCL on the subject of Anglo-Saxon tower-chapels as buildings of secular and religious power. He is Publicity Officer and committee member for SCA.*