

# THE TOWER OF LONDON AND THE JEWISH EXPULSION OF 1290

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## SUMMARY

*A closer look at the accounts of Ralph of Sandwich, Constable of the Tower of London, for the year 1290 reveals the involvement of the Tower in the expulsion of the Jews from England in that year. The Jews had to pay the Constable a toll before embarking for France.*

The historical relationship between the Jews and the Tower of London is often portrayed in completely negative terms, with the Jews herded in their hundreds into the 'dungeons' under the White Tower, and thence taken out either to forced conversion or to summary execution.<sup>1</sup> Modern scholarship, by contrast, is revealing that this relationship was in fact a very mixed one.<sup>2</sup> Episodes of mass-imprisonment did occur, as in the confinement of 600 and execution of 269 Jews between 1278 and 1279,<sup>3</sup> and earlier in the century, in connection with allegations of ritual murder, such as the death of 'Little Saint Hugh' of Lincoln,<sup>4</sup> but, for much of the period of Jewish settlement, the Tower was equally involved with the Jews' protection and welfare.

As royal 'property', the Jews of London were entrusted to the authority of the Keeper or Constable of the Tower. There are numerous documented instances in which the Jews and their chattels were taken into protective custody within the fortress;<sup>5</sup> on one occasion, during the 1267 London uprising led by Gilbert de Clare and the 'Disinherited', the Jews were even recruited by the papal legate Ottobuono to assist in the defence of the Tower, in the event, successfully.<sup>6</sup> The Constable of the Tower also held his own judicial sessions for the Jewry inside the fortress, and maintained an officer, the Serjeant of the Jewry, responsible for the

regulation of all activities, Jewish and Christian, within the district, located well away from the Tower, in which Jews predominantly lived.<sup>7</sup> Relations between the Jews and the Tower have also left a more tangible legacy in the moat, the outer curtain wall, and the building now known as 'Traitors' Gate', their construction funded in part by a 'tallage' (tax) on the Jews during the 1270s.<sup>8</sup>

The medieval documentation for the Tower of London in the National Archive (Public Record Office) at Kew is likely to deter all but the unwary and the obsessive. Hundreds of rolls, many legible only under ultra-violet light, written in abbreviated Latin or idiosyncratic old French and in a variety of hands, they encompass a huge range of activities. Documents include inventories of contents (from weaponry to prisoners), writs ordering works to be carried out, documents of the Mint and Royal Wardrobe, and, most voluminous, accounts of officials working at the Tower, declaring their income and expenses to be refunded. Most of these accounts are formulaic and repetitive, and a cursory scan can easily leave the small details unnoticed.

Such a document is E101 4/25, unpromisingly labelled as an account of the income and expenses of Ralph of Sandwich, Constable of the Tower of London, running from July 1289 to September 1301. At the very end of the manuscript are several useful entries about building works in the fortress, mentioning repairs to the king's and queen's chambers, the kitchen and bakehouse, a stable next to the Great Tower (now the White Tower), the drawbridge outside *Pycardesgate* (the present Middle Tower), and Ralph's expenses in maintaining Welsh prisoners. The bulk of the

document is at first sight much less interesting, concerned with Ralph's income during the period, and the entries for most years talk about the same things: tolls levied on merchant vessels in the Thames, revenue from the sale of brick-earth from the Tower's moat to the tilers of London, and paltry rents from three 'old and unsound' cottages in East Smithfield. In the middle of these accounts, easily missed, is the following entry:

*Idem reddit compotum de xxiii li et vi s receptis de consuetudine predicta tempore transfretationis Judeorum predicto anno xviii videlicet pro transfretatione m ccc xxxv Judeorum de Londoniis usque Whitsand de quolibet Judeo iiii d. Et de cxxvi pauperibus Judeis de quolibet ii d.*

The same (Ralph) declares receipt of 23 pounds and 6 shillings by the said custom at the time of the crossing of the Jews in the same year 18, namely for the crossing of 1,335 Jews from London to Wissant, each Jew paying 4 pence, and additionally from 126 poor Jews, each paying 2 pence.<sup>9</sup>

The 18th year of the reign of King Edward I (1272–1307), the year of Ralph of Sandwich's receiving this sum of money, was 1290, and the 'crossing of the Jews' refers to the well-documented event of that year, in which the entire community of Jews was ordered to quit the territory of the English King and go into perpetual exile. The expulsion has been extensively analysed by modern historians. The reasons for Edward I's decision continue to arouse debate, invoking political, economic, and financial arguments on the one hand, and hardening cultural and religious attitudes on the other.<sup>10</sup> The historical record is clear that in the decades immediately before the expulsion, the Jewish communities were increasingly hard-pressed, subject to crippling taxation, their lives regulated by ever more restrictive legislation, and, most dramatically, their numbers reduced by episodes of mass-arrest and hanging, connected with accusations of coin-clipping<sup>11</sup> and non-payment of taxes. It has been estimated that by 1290 the total population of Jews in England may have numbered as few as 2000. With a few notorious exceptions, such as the stranding of Jews on a sandbank at Queenborough, the departure of the Jewish population took place in an orderly manner and without incident.<sup>12</sup>

Hitherto it has generally been believed that

the Tower of London played little part in the expulsion. This account, on the other hand, shows that the Constable of the Tower took an important supervisory role in the embarkation and departure of a large number. He clearly regarded the embarkation and departure of several shiploads of Jews in the same terms as many other classes of traffic on the Thames, as a fit subject for the extraction of a toll, just like the herring-boats from Yarmouth, the various vessels of Londoners and 'outsiders', and the pilgrims making for Santiago, whose toll-payments to the Constable are documented in this and many other accounts. Like a modern traveller paying 'airport tax', 1,461 Jews, 126 of them impoverished by recent events and only able to pay half the toll, secured the permission of the Constable of the Tower before embarkation. These formalities concluded, they crossed from London to the north coast of France, into whose existing Jewish communities they all but disappeared.<sup>13</sup>

It may be coincidental, but is nonetheless a resonant point of historical circularity, that the most famous monument of the revived post-Cromwellian Jewish community, Bevis Marks Synagogue, first opened in 1701, should stand so close to the Tower of London, the fortress which witnessed the forced departure of that community's medieval predecessors.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> G Parnell *The Tower of London* (1993), 54.

<sup>2</sup> V D Lipman 'The jurisdiction of the Tower authorities outside the walls' in J Charlton (ed) *The Tower of London. Its Buildings and Institutions* (1978), 144–52.

<sup>3</sup> National Archive, Public Record Office (PRO), E352/74 rot 1 mld, E101 249/22, printed and translated in H G Richardson (ed) *Calendar of the Plea Rolls of the Exchequer of the Jews* vol 4 (1972), 148–94; E372/123 rot 10 mld.

<sup>4</sup> H R Luard (ed) *Matthei Parisiensis Monachi Sancti Albani Chronica Majora* vol 5, Rolls Series, 7 vols (1872–83), 552.

<sup>5</sup> eg H R Luard (ed) *Annales Monastici, volume 3, Annales Prioratus de Dunstaplia etc* (1866), 57; Z E Rokéah (ed) *Medieval English Jews and Royal Officials. Entries of Jewish Interest in the English Memoranda Rolls 1266–1293* (2000), 107.

<sup>6</sup> C Roth, *The Jews in the Defence of Britain, Thirteenth to Nineteenth Centuries*, Presidential Address delivered before the Jewish Historical Society of Great Britain in 1940 (1943); H R Luard (ed) *Flores Historiarum*, vol 3, Rolls Series (1890), 14–16.

<sup>7</sup> H G Richardson, *The English Jewry under Angevin Kings* (1960), 155–60. For the London Jewry, see particularly J Hillaby, 'London: the 13th-century Jewry re-visited' *Jewish Historical Studies* 32 (1993), 89–153.

<sup>8</sup> eg *Calendar of the Patent Rolls of Edward I, 1272–1281* (1901), 100; Rokéah *op cit* (note 5), 186; Richardson *op cit* (note 3), 131.

<sup>9</sup> PRO, E 101/4/25 m1. This item has been mentioned in print, but the reference to the 'poor Jews' has, to my knowledge, not been discussed before. See R R Mundill 'Medieval Anglo-Jewry: expulsion and exodus' in F Burghard, A Haverkamp and G Mentgen (ed) *Judenvertreibungen in Mittelalter und früher Neuzeit* (1999), 75–97, esp 94.

<sup>10</sup> For recent commentaries, see R R Mundill, *England's Jewish Solution. Experiment and Expulsion, 1262–1290* (1998); 'Edward I and the final phase of Anglo-Jewry' in P Skinner (ed) *Jews in Medieval Britain* (2002), 55–70.

<sup>11</sup> Z E Rokéah 'Money and the hangman in late-13th century England: Jews, Christians and coinage offences, alleged and real' *Jewish Historical Studies* 31 (1990), 83–109.

<sup>12</sup> Mundill *op cit* (note 9), 93.

<sup>13</sup> *ibid*, 94, reports the observation that Jews of English origin formed an identifiable group in two particular areas of Paris.