

# Milk Street Mikveh

A unique archaeological remnant of London's medieval Jewish community has been on display for two years now. Ian Blair and Bruce Watson discuss why it's so important, and how it has been reconstructed.

Since March 2010 the 13th-century ashlar-lined *Mikveh* (Jewish ritual bath) from Milk Street has been on display in the enlarged Jewish Museum, Camden Town. The discovery of the bath in October 2001 during excavations at 1–6 Milk Street in the City of London aroused huge interest amongst the local Jewish community.<sup>1</sup> The comments made by Jewish visitors to the *Mikveh* during its excavation made a lasting impression on all concerned. Almost all the family of one elderly, blind visitor had perished in the Holocaust. She described how a great sense of loss had stayed with her ever since, making every fragment of her heritage all the more precious. Her donation was one of many from the Jewish community which paid for the dismantling of the *Mikveh*.

The medieval Jewish community was only present in London for some 200 years before they were expelled in 1290. Jews were not permitted to resettle legally in England again until 1656. Archaeological evidence that can be securely linked with England's medieval Jewish community is therefore rare. Even so, the preservation and display of this unique structure proved to be a challenge. As the new basement then under construction at Milk Street left no option but the removal of the *Mikveh* if it was to be preserved, it was dismantled and stored while an appropriate display site was sought. It needed a subterranean location to replicate its original setting, ruling out the Museum of London's first floor Medieval Gallery. Attempts to display the *Mikveh* under a protective structure in the forecourt of Bevis Marks Synagogue failed. Having earlier declined the *Mikveh* through lack of space, the Jewish Museum realised in 2005, as they began planning their new extension, that they would have space to accommodate it after all.

The *Mikveh* has been reconstructed at the rear of the enlarged Jewish Museum – a position that allows visitors to view the structure from three sides. The use of angled mirrors at the back, and lighting and projection to mimic the floor and water, provides a further visual aspect to the exhibition. Although most of the structure is original, some new Reigate stone has been added to replace masonry robbed out in antiquity – most notably part of the apsidal bath end and the upper three steps. Although there was physical evidence of at least seven steps, it has only been possible to replicate six of these in the reconstruction, which, given the fragmentary nature of the top of the structure, does not detract from the exhibit. Unfortunately, the visual impact of the structure is lessened by the upper reconstructed steps having been



set with their surfaces where the base of the originals would have been – in essence displaying a false and shallower set of stairs than the original monument possessed. The addition of a wide stepped cement filet below the uppermost courses of the flank wall likewise detracts from the visual impact and in truth misrepresents the remains as found. All of these features could be simply corrected and in doing so would give a more faithful and enhanced visual quality to the *Mikveh* which a structure of this importance and rarity merits.

The Milk Street *Mikveh* is the only surviving example of this type of medieval monument in England, so it deserves to be on display. Another *Mikveh* was excavated in 1986 at Gresham Street in London,<sup>2</sup> but no attempt was made to preserve it. An enigmatic structure at Jacob's Well, Bristol formerly thought to be a *Mikveh* is now re-interpreted as a *Bet Tohorah*.<sup>3</sup>

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## Notes

1. I. Blair et al 'Two Medieval Jewish ritual baths – *Mikva'ot* found at Gresham Street and Milk Street in London' *Trans London Middlesex Archaeol Soc* 52 (2001) 127–37.
2. See fn 1 for details.
3. This is a place where corpses are washed and prepared for burial in accordance with Jewish customs, see J. Hillaby and R. Sermon 'Jacob's Well, Bristol: a *Mikveh* or a *Bet Tohorah*?' *Trans Bristol Glous Archaeol Soc* 122 (2004) 127–52.

**ABOVE** The *Mikveh* in situ at the Jewish Museum in Camden Town.  
Photo: Ian Blair