

## NOT ONLY FOR THE COFFEE TABLE

*THE SYNAGOGUES OF BRITAIN AND IRELAND*

SHARMAN KADISH

Yale University Press, 2011, hb, 398pp, £45

Reviewed by Janet Levin

Sometimes it seems as if Sharman Kadish is single-handedly protecting the Jewish built heritage in the UK from decay and dilapidation. Over the past few years she has set up the organisation Jewish Heritage UK, worked tirelessly to secure from English Heritage every possible grant for improvement and maintenance, brought out the much-praised *Jewish Heritage in England – An Architectural Guide*, and done whatever else she could to alert the Jewish community to its responsibilities to future generations.

In *The Synagogues of Britain and Ireland* she has achieved a triumph. This volume is more comprehensive than the *Guide*, including Scotland, Wales and Ireland and synagogues which have been pulled down or assigned to other uses.

My first impression on leafing through its pages was surprise and pride that England's buildings should include such a magnificent Jewish heritage.

The photos are stunning, the large format making much more impact than those in the *Guide*. Nigel Corrie and his fellow photographers from English Heritage have done such a good job that it is possible you might feel a little let down when you see the real thing – but at least it will give you the appetite to visit and see through new eyes. Photographs of stained glass – about which there is a whole chapter – are particularly difficult to do well – and those here are wonderful.

The book tells the story of the British synagogue in terms of the history of the Jews in these isles. It starts with Bevis Marks and the Georgian synagogue and finishes with the contemporary. Those interested in the history of architecture will find a wealth of detail including many architectural drawings and explorations of stylistic influences. For me the special interest in the text is the light it throws on the position of Jews in society. The section on Bevis Marks, for example, explains why the Christian master builder Joseph Avis was selected as architect.

“From the Middle Ages Jews had been

excluded from the craftsmen's guilds, undoubtedly impeding their training as architects or builders. Jewish artistic endeavour was largely confined to calligraphy, printing, silverwork and textiles – books and ritual objects being portable, unlike buildings.”

Kadish also points out that the Tablets of the Law, prominent above the Ark in Bevis Marks, appeared in a very similar form in several Wren churches. Joseph Avis and many of his builders also worked with Wren: the tablets can be traced back to Christian art in the Middle Ages.

The research for this book has been thorough enough to discover, for example, that in 1793 the *Ipswich Journal* reported that the local Jews had placed a Prayer for the Royal Family on the wall of their synagogue and carried a full translation of the Hebrew text, which is close to the prayer found in British synagogues to this day. Such marks of allegiance were particularly important at the time of the Napoleonic Wars when Jewish loyalties were suspect.

And so it goes on. Each chapter has unknown and interesting insights.

Sharman Kadish does not shirk from pointing out the deficiencies of the British Jewish wealthy, compared to their continental counterparts, in their failure to

commission synagogue architecture. She notes the absence of art nouveau and art deco in synagogue design and the overlooking of the potential contribution of the Modern Movement architects who had fled to Britain, such as Erno Goldfinger, as well as the shame that Chagall's only commission was for a Christian chapel.

This is too big – and heavy – a book to be read at one stretch, but it will be dipped into, perhaps when pursuing an interest in a particular period of British Jewish history, or planning a visit to a particular building. In the meantime, keep it on your coffee table – along, I hope, with the latest issue of *Jewish Renaissance*. This will be a good way to help Sharman Kadish in her mission of awakening all of us to what we have and to the danger of what we might lose.

**What's the use of synagogues?** That is, those redundant to community needs. This is a problem that will only grow. In coming issues of *JR* Sharman Kadish and others will look at the different roles of former synagogue buildings and ask, “Is this appropriate?” What can we do to encourage use which will perpetuate the memory of the former worshippers?



St John's Wood United Synagogue *Bet HaMidrash*, *Tree of Life* stained glass by Ardyn Halter, 1998