The Jews of medieval Cambridge*

R. B. DOBSON

As it happens, this presidential address is being delivered more or less seven hundred years to the day since the last persecuted survivors of the once substantial medieval English Jewry were crossing the Channel into involuntary exile, ‘without the hope of ever returning’, after their banishment from this country on 1 November 1290. It may not be quite so important, but it is certainly much less dispiriting, to remember that almost a century has elapsed since the foundation of this Society in 1893. As we rapidly approach our centenary year, we must all hesitate to think what the present state of Jewish historical studies in this country would now be had it not been for the indefatigable labours and enterprise of our founding fathers a hundred years ago.

Perhaps a medieval historian might be forgiven for making the additional point that at the heart of our Society’s almost instantaneous scholarly success in the 1890s lay a particular strength in medieval Jewish studies. At a period when the academic study of history, heavily biased towards English national political and constitutional development, was an extremely young and tender plant within British universities, this Society’s earliest members were conducting detailed documentary research of exceptional quality, research whose full value is still perhaps insufficiently appreciated a hundred years later. The enthusiasm for Jewish history unleashed by the great London Anglo-Jewish Historical Exhibition of 1887 created what Professor Robert Stacey has recently termed the ‘heroic age’ of Jewish historical scholarship in England. Above all, this was the heroic age for the study of medieval Anglo-Jewry, adorned as that study was by scholars, often not themselves university-trained, of the calibre of Joseph Jacobs, Lionel Abrahams, Michael Adler, Herbert Loewe and Lucien Wolf, whose ‘A Plea for Anglo-Jewish History’ filled the first pages of the first volume of the Society’s Transactions in 1893-4. In some ways the study of the medieval English Jewry has never been as fortunate again as it was in the years before 1914; and in retrospect there were several decades in the middle of this century when it occasionally seemed that only the extraordinary energy of Dr Cecil Roth (who still holds the prize for writing more articles for the Transactions than any other scholar) could ensure the continued vitality of the subject. Thanks to the efforts of present members of the Society, as well as those of Cecil Roth himself and the late and much lamented Dr Vivian Lipman, in 1990 the study of the medieval English

Jewry is so far from exhausted that it shows considerable signs of positive regeneration. As befits the best-documented case of how a medieval subject-minority struggled to retain its cohesion and identity within a hostile unitary 'state', the Jewry of twelfth- and thirteenth-century England now appears to have an even greater exemplary role to fulfil in the future than it has been seen to fulfill in the past.

It follows that almost eighty years after they were spoken, we would all approve the opening words delivered to this Society by one of my predecessors in his first presidential address, delivered on 23 November 1914. 'It would be gratifying', he opened his lecture by saying, 'to see the completion of the Exchequer publications, to see the editing of other Jewish documents, and to welcome the history of the Jewries in many of our important towns.' The Society - committed as it is to the imminent publication of the fifth volume of its calendars of the plea rolls of the Jewish exchequer - today needs no reminding that many of the desiderata of 1914 remain desiderata still. However, I have cited those now ancient words of presidential aspiration for reasons more relevant to my appearance on this occasion. In the first place, the speaker of those words deserves to be remembered, which he now rarely is, as the first President of the Society (1914-16) not to be a Jew himself. Indeed, Canon Henry Paine Stokes, LLD, DLitt, FSA, and Honorary Fellow of Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, was by all accounts a paradigm of the formidably industrious late-Victorian Anglican parson. Born in 1849, he was more or less continuously resident in or near Cambridge after he first entered the gates of Corpus in 1872 and later served a variety of parishes in or around the university town. Although eventually an honorary canon of Ely Cathedral, for Canon Stokes the pleasures of ecclesiastical administration always took second place to those of local historical research. After 1895, when he became a member of the Cambridge Antiquarian Society, Stokes dedicated most of his considerable leisure to elucidating the medieval history of the town, rather than the university of Cambridge; and it was as a result of those researches, and especially of his two remarkable volumes on tenurial history outside the Trumpington and Barnwell gates, that Canon Stokes emerged as the most learned of all authorities (not that there have been so many of them) on the history of the Jews of medieval Cambridge.

For a historian like myself, once acquainted with the history of the Jews of medieval York but since 1988 teaching in the very different academic landscape of the Fens, the opportunity to use this occasion to reassess the pioneering work on the Cambridge Jewry by Canon Stokes (who died in the year I was born) has therefore been impossible to resist. It must be said at once that Canon Stokes's full-length study of the history of the Jews of Cambridge has never altogether received the credit it properly deserves. In retrospect it seems unfortunate that Stokes effectively disguised the contents of his book - primarily an ambitious attempt to collect all significant surviving references to the Cambridge Jewry - by giving that work, finally published in 1913, the excessively general and even
The Jews of medieval Cambridge
decptive title of Studies in Anglo-Jewish History.9 Partly for that reason, the not inconsiderable documentary discoveries made by Canon Stokes have left a much less notable mark on the work of later scholars such as Dr Cecil Roth, Dr Vivian Lipman and even Mr H. G. Richardson than those of his own contemporaries such as Joseph Jacobs and Michael Adler. However, it also has to be admitted that Stokes’s painstaking labour of love hardly bears comparison with the analogous studies of other medieval Jewish communities produced by the latter. Although occasionally enlivened by its author’s addiction to the early tenurial history of Cambridge, Studies in Anglo-Jewish History is nothing if not a work of antiquarianism. Rather like a medieval chronicler himself indeed, Canon Stokes seems to have seen his role as that of a collector of exempla to be used by other scholars; and he accordingly concluded his book with nothing more ambitious than a catalogue of well-known ‘illustrations of Jewish life and customs . . . chronicled in our history of the Jews in Cambridge?10 In the case of a specific historical problem Stokes could certainly often bring a very sensible judgement to bear, for instance in explaining why the influence of thirteenth-century Cambridge Jews on the early university there was likely to have been minimal.11 However, throughout his long account of the Cambridge Jewry Canon Stokes made no serious attempt at generalization, either in interpreting the vicissitudes in its fortunes or in searching for those forces which made its history distinctive and more than merely ‘illustrative’ of some well-worn themes.

Such omissions are, however, a good deal easier to expose than to rectify. By no means all of Canon Stokes’s limitations were of his own making; and it is one of the paradoxes of the history of the Cambridge Jewry that it should be worth our attention precisely because it is so exceptionally difficult to write. The difficulties in question are perhaps best exposed by way of contrast. Forty years ago, in what was arguably the most impressive book he ever wrote, Dr Cecil Roth was able to reveal the operations of the Jews resident in England’s other medieval university town in unprecedented detail.12 Admittedly, on a famous occasion before this Society, Roth once uttered the cri de coeur that he only wished he could really know how one Oxford Jew or Jewish woman spent a single day of their lives. Nevertheless, that particular sentiment – to which all medievalists are congenitally prone by virtue of their profession – must certainly not prevent one from acknowledging that Roth’s The Jews of Medieval Oxford is extraordinarily successful in recapturing the economic patterns, the social structure and sometimes even the thought processes of the Jews it anatomizes.13 What more natural than to suppose that the Jews by the Cam might respond to the same sort of critical scrutiny as the Jews by the Thames? Unfortunately the answer to that question is largely, if not completely, in the negative. As Canon Stokes only half realized, the historian who one day writes the histoire totale of the medieval Cambridge Jewry will fare less happily than most of his counterparts elsewhere: in the last resort, the overall effect of the canon’s labours is to remind us – somewhat ironically – of grave evidential deficiencies,
some perhaps eventually redeemable but others inherent in the Cambridge sources.

For obvious reasons, only a few of these deficiencies can be mentioned here. However, and in the first place, it seems highly probable that the Cambridge Jewry (unlike those at, say, Norwich, York and Worcester) was at its most substantial and influential in the twelfth century, when original evidence of any sort for Jewish activity in the country can be very slight; and it was apparently a good deal less prominent in the thirteenth century, when documentary evidence is much more abundant. Even more than in the case of other English provincial Jewries, we are faced with the paradox that we know most about the medieval Cambridge community when it had ceased to be of the greatest significance.14 Secondly, and for whatever reason, the Cambridge Jewry in the thirteenth century seems to have produced far fewer very rich financiers and entrepreneurs than most other large English Jewish settlements of that period. For the student of the Cambridge community it is therefore a particular misfortune that the business activities of the wealthiest Jews in Plantagenet England, like David of Oxford and Aaron of York, are those which are much the most fully documented in surviving royal records.15 By contrast the bonds and litigation of the Jews of Cambridge fail to reveal a very clear impression of their family fortunes from decade to decade and are often indeed exceptionally hard to interpret in general terms. One can well understand why at the end of the twelfth century Jocelin of Brakelond, a Benedictine monk only too familiar with Jewish credit operations conducted in a great abbey not far from Cambridge, confessed that ‘I never discovered what lay behind these transactions’.16

Jocelin of Brakelond’s understandable lament also applies to those sources – starrs and bonds on the one side and the cartularies of local religious houses on the other – on which a precise knowledge of Jewish settlement and landholding patterns in Cambridge and Cambridgeshire must directly rely. Despite occasional and instructive attempts to trace manorial descents in the relevant volumes of the Victoria County History for the County of Cambridgeshire, it has to be admitted that the tenurial history of Cambridge and its shire during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries still remains more or less completely unwritten.17 Here especially, the contrast with the medieval Oxford Jewry could hardly be greater. Dr Cecil Roth’s debt to H. E. Salter’s remarkably thorough reconstruction of medieval Oxford’s tenemental patterns is evident on more or less every page of The Jews of Medieval Oxford.18 By contrast, and despite Dr Miri Rubin’s recent and instructive exploration of the cartulary of the Hospital of St John the Baptist near the heart of the Cambridge Jewry, medieval Cambridge still awaits its H. E. Salter. Not that the reconstitution of the landowning and tenurial map of thirteenth-century Cambridge will ever be a simple matter, partly because so much of the original evidence remains dispersed in college archives (like those of Peterhouse, St John’s and Jesus Colleges) where it is only now being collected by Dr Rosemary Horrox.19
The Jews of medieval Cambridge

Nor, at either the national or the regional level, does the Jewish community at Cambridge seem to have attracted much attention in surviving Christian chronicles of the period. Even the local Augustinian canons of Barnwell Priory, who knew the Cambridge Jewry well, made no mention in their liber memorandorum of the two most dramatic events in the history of that Jewry, namely the audacious removal of its chirograph chest or archa to Ely in 1266 and the abrupt banishment of all Jews from Cambridge nine years later.20 Indeed, Queen Eleanor of Provence’s decision to prohibit Jewish settlement within her dower towns, made fifteen years before the enforced departure of all Jews from the English realm in 1290, is a serious additional misfortune for the historian of the Cambridge Jewry: it automatically deprives the latter of the documentation which in many other Jewish communities was never so abundant as during those melancholy final years.21

Against this background of severe evidential deficiency, it therefore seems not entirely inappropriate that we should owe our knowledge of the first recorded Jew of medieval Cambridge to a document compiled quite far away from Cambridge itself. To add to the irony, the Jew in question, Theobald of Cambridge (Theobaldus Kantebrugie), only emerges from obscurity in 1144 within the precincts of Norwich Cathedral as an alleged convert to Christianity who was now no less than a Christian monk.22 So startling and inherently implausible (one might well think) a change of religious life is all we know about the career of the central figure in the most notorious, controversial and alas influential religious atrocity perpetrated in twelfth-century England. Ever since Augustus Jessopp and Montague Rhodes James first published the unique manuscript of Thomas of Monmouth’s liber de vita et passione Sancti Willelmi martyris Norwicensis almost a century ago, it has always been appreciated that the testimony supposedly provided by Theobald of Canterbury in support of the boy William’s sanctity seems to have been utterly crucial in establishing the case for the little St William’s martyrdom at the hands of the Norwich Jews – and therefore equally crucial in disseminating the first known ritual murder allegation in Judeo-Christian history.23 The history of the Jews of medieval Cambridge accordingly begins, under the most sombre of circumstances, at Norwich.

On the basis of Thomas of Monmouth’s voluminous compilation, admittedly and suspiciously not finally completed until over twenty years after the discovery of William of Norwich’s body on 24 March 1144, it does indeed seem probable that the argumentum proffered by Theobald as a self-acknowledged ex-Jew was decisive in bringing home a ritual-murder charge in the face of an initially sceptical local public opinion. Not only did Theobald allege that he knew all about the alleged murder by the Jews (there are indeed those who have argued that he was the murderer himself) but he produced an extraordinary story of the way in which such boy-sacrifices were centrally planned (by Jewish potentates meeting every year in Narbonne) to take place annually in different parts of Christendom.24 To
that extent Theobald the ex-Jew of Cambridge obviously emerges as the most sinister of all the figures in a sinister story, more capable than has usually been appreciated of producing propaganda chillingly anticipatory of the insanities of the Protocols of the Elders of Zion in our own time. Such propaganda clearly was in circulation at Norwich cathedral during the years after 1144 even if the precise role of Theobald of Cambridge still remains open to a multitude of hypotheses. At the two most obvious extremes, it might be argued either that Theobald was the author (in M. R. James’s phrase) ‘of one of the most notable lies of history . . . responsible for the blood of thousands of his fellow-countrymen’, or that he never existed at all, being the fictitious creation of members of the Norwich clergy anxious to use any means to buttress a dubious cause. That several of those clerks, determined to secure a new saint for their cathedral, were capable of stretching and indeed falsifying evidence to an extent remarkable even by twelfth-century standards seems beyond doubt. Even so, and whatever the uncertainties, one conclusion at least seems incontrovertible. As the genuine or pseudo-Theobald is made to say, ‘I was at that time at Cambridge, a Jew among Jews (cum iudeis iudeus).’ By 1144 at latest the Cambridge Jewry was known to be in being.

Such an early settlement of Jews in Cambridge is of course only what we might reasonably expect. Admittedly, the fundamental issue of exactly how and when Jews first began to disperse throughout some – but certainly not all – of the major provincial towns of Anglo-Norman England remains the single greatest unsolved problem in the history of medieval Jewish settlement in this country. Most assessments of the probabilities, my own included, are undoubtedly dangerously dependent on arguments ex silentio and on incidental references in the Exchequer Pipe Rolls, themselves only a continuous series after 1154. However, it remains hard to resist H. G. Richardson’s argument that for at least two generations after the first Jews crossed the Channel from Normandy to England in the wake of William I’s successful conquest of England, few of these new immigrants can have made a serious attempt to settle permanently outside London. Only after the death of the Conqueror’s youngest son, Henry I, in 1135 is the creation of substantial Jewries in English provincial towns likely to have got seriously under way; and it may well be (although it would be extremely difficult to prove) that it was during the so-called anarchy of Stephen’s reign that small groups of English Jews at last began to find it preferable to conduct their financial transactions while residing in an important county town rather than by visiting it on an irregular basis. To such a generalization mid-twelfth-century Cambridge would a priori be most likely to conform. The motte-and-bailey castle built to the north of the Cam by William the Conqueror himself in 1068 offered an alien minority at least the necessary prospect of protection in times of trial. Cambridge itself was admittedly a comparatively small county town, whose population has been estimated at not much more than two thousand souls at the time of Domesday Book; but by the early years of the twelfth century all the available evidence suggests that the town
The Jews of medieval Cambridge

was beginning to experience the most dramatic economic expansion in its medieval history. Above all, Cambridge lay at the centre of one of the most agriculturally fertile regions of Angevin England, providing surpluses of corn which might support exactly that prosperous class of local landholders on whose misfortunes or extravagances the fortunes of the medieval English Jews themselves ultimately depended.31

It seems to follow, especially as it was located less than sixty miles from London, that the Cambridge Jewry was probably one of the earliest of such provincial communities to be founded. It appears virtually certain too (although this is yet another of the major unresolved problems of medieval Jewish history) that the first Jews to settle in Cambridge must already have had some financial capital, presumably raised primarily in London, at their disposal. At a very early date in their existence, for example, the Cambridge Jews were able to advance what must have been very considerable sums to Bishop Nigel of Ely, who took it as a matter of course that they would accept as security an antique and highly decorated cross (no less than ‘the golden crucifix of St Edgar’ itself) as well as a valuable copy of the Gospels.32 Pawnbroking at somewhat more prosaic levels probably always remained one of the most important (but least-well-documented) activities of the Cambridge Jewry; but it remains uncertain whether or not this especially spectacular pledge represents the earliest recorded business transaction involving the Jews of Cambridge. As the pontificate of Bishop Nigel of Ely lasted for as long as thirty-six years, from 1133 to 1169, much the most incontrovertible evidence for the early establishment of a substantial Jewry by the Cam derives from the contribution the latter made to a famous donum levied by the young Henry II in 1159. On that occasion, the first of all documented royal levies on the English Jews, Cambridge not only housed one of the ten Jewries subject to the tax, but contributed the comparatively large sum of 50 marks or £33 6s 8d. So large a ‘gift’ was only equalled by the Jewry of Hampshire or Winchester; and only surpassed by the major centres of Lincoln (60 marks), Norwich (72½ marks) and of course London (200 marks).33 All allowances made for the serious dangers involved in interpreting the comparative figures provided by Jewish taxation records as an infallible guide to the wealth of provincial communities, it is hard to suppose that the Cambridge Jewry could have contributed so handsomely to the 1159 donum unless it had been first established several years earlier, most probably perhaps at some point in the 1140s. If so, the Jews of Cambridge provide a classic demonstration of William fitz Stephen’s famous but sometimes misunderstood assertion that it was immediately after the Anarchy was over that ‘there emerged in safety from towns and castles both merchants seeking fairs and Jews looking for creditors’.34

In any case, it seems clear enough that at the start of the reign of Henry II – by any standards the most expansionist phase in the history of the medieval English Jewry – the Cambridge Jews were already well established as one of East Anglia’s leading purveyors of credit. From the beginning too they were under the rigid
supervision and (at most times) watchful protection of the sheriff of Cambridgeshire and other royal officials. As early as 1155 a cryptic Pipe Roll entry records a payment of 20s od ‘for a slain Jew’, the first recorded case of homicide in the history of the Cambridge Jewry.35 Of the moneylending activities of the Cambridge Jews in Henry II’s reign, it has already been suggested that somewhat less is known than one might have had a reasonable right to expect. Indeed much of the best documented of loans made by members of the Cambridge Jewry in the early part of that reign were those incurred by Richard of Anstey in the course of his famous and ‘almost interminable’ attempt to recover his property rights in the royal courts between 1158 and 1163. ‘In the first year of my plea’, Richard of Anstey claimed to have borrowed 40s od from ‘Vives, the Jew of Cambridge’ at the exceptionally high interest rate of a groat a week on the pound. At the following Easter he was obliged to borrow another 60s od from the same Vives, that debt being followed in due course by two further loans of £4 10s od and £5 respectively from Comitissa of Cambridge.36 As H. G. Richardson once pointed out, Richard of Anstey was by no means a close neighbour of the Cambridge Jewry (the village and castle of Anstey are a mile or two over the Cambridgeshire border in Hertfordshire): and the very fact that he was prepared to have recourse to Vives and Comitissa in times of acute financial need is itself an indication of the wide geographical extent of the Cambridge Jewry’s financial interests.37 Moreover, Richard’s loans from Vives and Comitissa – of comparatively small sums repaid within a few months – may not in fact be altogether typical of the Cambridge Jews’ financial operations at a later date. However, at least they have the incidental significance of revealing the most prominent female member of the Cambridge Jewry at any moment of its history. Comitissa, alternatively known as ‘La Countesse’, later fined 7 marks (in 1169) for the marriage of one of her sons to a Lincoln Jewess without royal licence, was apparently the foundress of the first important dynasty recorded in the history of the Cambridge community.38

However, for the first reliable impression of the names and numbers of the most substantial members of the Cambridge Jewry one must wait until as late as 1194, the year of the so-called gift or donum promised to Richard I by his Jewish subjects on his return from imprisonment in the German Reich. At Cambridge, as in the case of most other urban Jewries, two separate lists of the contributors to this levy were dispatched to Westminster together with their individual assessments.39 Of the eighteen different Jews mentioned, only four contributed more than £5 to Richard I’s first significant attempt to tax his Jewish servii camere on a national basis; and almost all, even including the unusually named Cipora wife of Hakeloç, are hard to identify with much conviction. What does emerge extremely clearly from the record of this donum is the financial ascendancy within the Cambridge community of Cipora’s son, David (assessed at £14 6s od) and – above all – of Benjamin of Kant, assessed at no less than £34 10s. It is a well-known irony that not only the correct identification of this Benjamin but also Cambridge’s claim to a role in the
The Jews of medieval Cambridge

intellectual history of the medieval English Jewry rests absolutely on the correct interpretation of the toponymic which forms the second constituent of his name.40 However, on the overwhelmingly probable if not quite certain assumption that the richest Cambridge Jew in 1194 was a Benjamin of Cambridge (‘Cantebrigiensis’) rather than of Canterbury (‘Cantuariensis’), then it is more or less indisputable that he should be identified with that ‘Master Benjamin’ who – in association with two of his sons and other Cambridge Jews – lent £40 to Matthew and John of Great or Little Shelford a decade later.41 In that case, and as Cecil Roth and others recognized long ago, the further identification of this ‘Master Benjamin’ with the pupil of Rabbi Tam who became a learned and influential exegist, a commentator on halakhah, grammar and other texts, becomes impossible to resist.42 That the wealthiest member of the Cambridge Jewish community during the reign of Richard I should also prove to be the only medieval Cambridge Jew to have left behind him a reputation for scholarship may at first seem not a little surprising; but Master Benjamin is not in fact at all unrepresentative of the extreme concentration of financial, spiritual and educational authority so characteristic of the patriarchy which dominated Jewish society in medieval England.43

The disproportionately high assessment of Benjamin of Cambridge at the time of the Northampton donum is also indicative of the extent to which – in so far as we can possibly know – the communal prosperity of a medieval urban Jewry was usually absolutely dependent on the outstanding fortunes of a very few and outstanding financial entrepreneurs. It was primarily because of Benjamin’s exceptional financial standing that at the end of the twelfth century Cambridge may still have seemed to the clerks of the royal exchequer the home of one of the most financially considerable Jewries in the kingdom. In 1194 the Jews of Cambridge had contributed as much as £98 10s to the Northampton donum of that year, more than any provincial Jewry in the country except Lincoln, Canterbury, Northampton and Gloucester.44 Cambridge was never to hold so high a position in such taxation assessments again; and by the time of the ‘aid’ levied on English Jewries for the marriage of Henry III’s sister in 1221, its position as a contributor to this tax had already fallen to twelfth place.45 As already suggested, the probabilities are that the economic fortunes of the Jewish community at Cambridge were at their height at the end of the twelfth century, exactly when many urban Jewries elsewhere were beginning to reveal their vulnerability to local Christian animosity. Perhaps one of the reasons why the ill-fated Jewish community at York proved most vulnerable of all in March 1190 was because it was a comparatively new settlement, to whose presence the local Christian population had not yet become fully adjusted and acclimatized.46 The same could hardly be said of the well-established Cambridge Jewry in 1190, raising the interesting problem that its historian sometimes has to explain what failed to happen as well as what did. May it have been because the Jews of Cambridge were already so familiar a feature of their local urban scene eight hundred years ago that they seem – remarkably
R. B. Dobson

enough, it might well be thought – to have escaped the savage persecution of other Jewish communities which swept through East Anglia and eastern England en route to York during the Lent of 1190? Here again arguments ex silentio must be hazardous to a degree; but for whatever reasons the Cambridge Jews appear to have been spared the worst of the atrocities which afflicted their compatriots at Dunstable, Bury St Edmunds, Norwich, King's Lynn and Stamford in that cataclysmic year.47

Benjamin of Cambridge, who presumably helped to lead his fellow Jews comparatively safely through the tribulations of 1190, has yet another and more intriguing claim on the attention of those interested in the development of the Cambridge Jewry. One of the most disconcerting features of that development is the absence of direct evidence as to where within the town most Cambridge Jews actually lived before the beginning of the thirteenth century; and to this day the location of the Jewry, and especially of its synagogue and cemetery, remains perhaps the most confused and controversial problem in its history. At the centre of this problem lies a reference of 1224 to a house in Cambridge which had once belonged to a Benjamin the Jew and whose possible role in the medieval town aroused even the equable Canon Stokes to a state of unusual excitement. When delivering his first Presidential Lecture to our Society in November 1914, the canon brought the startling and encouraging message that ‘At this very time, at Cambridge, a house is about to be demolished, or altered, which was a Jewish synagogue in early pre-Expulsion days. Our [Cambridge] Antiquarian Society has appealed to the Town Corporation, who are the owners of it, to spare the underground rooms with their massive walls, and a favourable reply has been sent to us.’48 Alas the first and most obvious moral to be drawn from Canon Stokes's excessively optimistic message is that medieval historians and antiquaries would be wise not to place their trust in town councils. For rather obvious reasons, the autumn of 1914 was not the most propitious of times for waging a conservationist battle within a city never in any case particularly notable for its desire to conserve the monuments of its past. If the shattered remnants of those intriguing ‘underground rooms’ still survive, perhaps near or below the present Cambridge Guildhall of 1936–7, no one now living in Cambridge seems to have a clear impression of where they might be.

Nevertheless, what a tantalizing prospect Canon Stokes was able to afford this Society almost eighty years ago, nothing less than the only remains of an authenticated medieval synagogue to survive in modern England. But was it authenticated? As is well known, most of the many complications involved in attempting to answer that question (so numerous that only a few can be mentioned here) stem from an incidental remark made by Thomas of Eccleston, the celebrated chronicler of the coming of the Franciscan friars to early-thirteenth-century England. While describing the first settlement of the Grey Friars at Cambridge in or just after 1226, Eccleston wrote that ‘at Cambridge the brethren were at first received by the
The Jews of medieval Cambridge

burgesses who made over to them an old synagogue near the prison’. Eccleston then proceeded to make it reasonably clear that synagogue and civic prison comprised a single house, sharing a common entrance door, to the very considerable inconvenience of the friars.49 The house in question can indeed be no other than ‘the house which was Benjamin the Jew’s’ for which the men of Cambridge had made a fine of no less than 40 marks to Henry III in October 1224 so that they could convert it into the civic gaol.50 The possibility that this obviously spacious and valuable town house, sited very near the market place, was at least for a period one of the medieval Cambridge synagogues as well as Benjamin’s major residence is not to be dismissed too readily. Nevertheless, it is important to emphasize not only that Benjamin’s house is never described as a schola in surviving royal records, but that Thomas of Eccleston perhaps never visited Cambridge in his life and may well have garbled the information he received about the origins of the Franciscan convent there.

Less plausible still is the belief that ‘the house of Benjamin the Jew’ lay at the geographic centre of the Cambridge Jewry, a hypothesis which, for example, led the antiquary William Cole to maintain – on no contemporary evidence whatsoever – that the Cambridge Jews occupied all the houses between Butcher Row and the medieval Guildhall.51 In 1782 this theory, which had already passed into local Cambridge folklore, was to be given additional currency by the alleged discovery on the site of the newly constructed Guildhall of a gravestone bearing a fragmentary Hebrew inscription: this in turn was interpreted as a solitary survival of a supposed medieval Jewish cemetery on the same site.52 However, given that the gravestone in question is now lost and that its recorded Hebrew inscription seems highly suspect, the possibility that – even in the first phase of their history – the residences of the Cambridge Jews were concentrated in and around the town’s market place rests on a very narrow evidential base indeed. Benjamin, an exceptional Cambridge Jew in many other ways, was almost certainly exceptional in holding a house eight hundred yards south of what, as will soon appear, was undoubtedly the true vicus Judeorum of his town. Finally, and most implausibly of all, it seems inconceivable that any medieval Jewish cemetery in northwest Christendom could have been located near the market place, the commercial centre, of a town. Indeed the true location of Cambridge’s Jewish cemetery remains a total mystery. In sharp contrast to York (where the Jewish cemetery at Jewbury is unique in having been subjected to systematic excavation, by the York Archaeological Trust in 1983), Oxford, London or nearly all other recorded medieval Jewish graveyards, only a most courageous documentary historian would dare to suggest where archaeologists may one day disinter the mortal remains of the Jews of medieval Cambridge.53

It may indeed already be too late to unearth the Jewish cemetery in Cambridge at all. Such at least was Canon Stokes’s own view when he was once brave enough to announce to this Society that what he called ‘the place of sepulture’ of the
R. B. Dobson

‘Israelites’ might perhaps lie under the site of the Selwyn Divinity School, built in St John’s Street by Basil Champneys in 1878–9.54 Although not a theory without some ironical appeal, Canon Stokes’s speculative hypothesis has alas little to commend it otherwise, except to draw attention to the fact that the Cambridge Jewry, if not its cemetery, was indeed located very near the site of the Selwyn Divinity School, immediately opposite the medieval hospital (and now the college) of St John’s. Amid all the prevailing topographical uncertainty, it is some consolation to be confident that in the course of the thirteenth century the Cambridge Judaismus was undoubtedly situated in the comparatively compact area of the town between the churches of the Holy Sepulchre and of All Saints in the Jewry, the latter destroyed in 1865.55 To be even more precise, the main vicus Judeorum of the years before 1275 survives to this day, now named All Saints’ Passage and still ideally situated: it provides a means of avoiding the notorious traffic junction where the two main arterial streets of medieval (and indeed modern) Cambridge meet before they proceed northwards to the Cam Bridge itself. Appropriately enough, the very last houses in Cambridge known to have been in Jewish possession belonged to Joceus son of Saulot, ‘the Jew of Briggestrede in the parish of St Sepulchre’.56

Somewhere within that parish too the most important medieval Cambridge synagogue is self-evidently likely to have stood, although probably not as a separate building. On this significant issue Canon Stokes made yet another enterprising, and more plausible, suggestion. Might this Cambridge schola have been the handsome stone building, which certainly once belonged to a Jew, later well known in the town as Bede’s House – before the latter too in due course succumbed to the insatiable territorial appetites of St John’s College57 Whether or not Stokes was correct ‘to suspect this stone hostel’, quite how and why the Jews of Cambridge came to settle, mainly if not exclusively, in the area opposite the hospital of St John leads their historian into some mysterious and still unresolved obscurities of their early settlement. It can have been no coincidence that most Cambridge Jews must have lived within a few hundred yards of possible shelter within the royal castle north of the river; but it is important to make the qualification that at times of persecution this castle was perhaps not so very readily accessible across the narrow ‘Cauntebrigg’ itself. All in all, it seems more probable that by the thirteenth century the Jews resided in the streets and lanes around the churches of Holy Sepulchre and All Saints because of that area’s topographical and commercial importance. Much less likely, as suggested once by T. D. Atkinson, this was a previously neglected part of Cambridge which had attracted initial Jewish settlement in the early and mid-twelfth centuries because it was semi-deserted waste land, liable to river floods and generally undeveloped.58 The fact of the matter is that the location of medieval English, and Christendom’s, Jewries, together with their synagogues and cemeteries, would much repay the thorough comparative analysis they have yet to receive.
The Jews of medieval Cambridge

Nor do the surviving records of the Cambridge Jews, increasingly plentiful and heterogeneous as they are after the reign of King John, reveal as much about the domestic life led within that Jewry as we might wish and as is the case in most large English towns of the period. It is hardly a surprise to discover, for instance, that several of those Jews could afford stone houses, much rarer and more expensive although these were – as they often still are – in an East Anglian town than in thirteenth-century London, York or Oxford. There can be little doubt, for example, that the ‘stone house on the corner opposite St Sepulchre’s’, which belonged to John Porthors in 1295, was once held by Jews: it was soon, in a way characteristic of the fate of much Jewish property in the town, to be bought by Robert de Fulbourne, Chancellor of the University, and given by him to the canons of Barnwell Priory. Nor is it a surprise – although it is certainly of the greatest significance – that Jewish and Christian residential housing in and around the *vicus Judeorum* seems to have been thoroughly intermixed: at Cambridge as elsewhere the religious adversaries were literally domestic neighbours. In this field more than any other, arguments *ex silentio* may be highly dangerous; but the evidence of the Jewish Plea Rolls of the Exchequer seems to suggest that the Cambridge Jews had less to fear from the murderous instincts of their fellow Christian townsmen than was true of London, York and indeed most provincial towns. Remarkably few of the most substantial Jewish financiers of thirteenth-century Cambridge came to a violent end; and only one member of the Cambridge Jewry (Saul Mutun, the head of a particularly wealthy dynasty in the town) is recorded as having been slain at the time of the savage anti-Jewish demonstrations associated with the activities of the Disinherited in the mid-1260s. Otherwise most of Cambridge’s Jews who came to an untimely end did so, like Bonnenfant (hanged for alleged currency offences not long before the expulsion of all Jews from the town in 1275) at the hands of the royal government. The Cambridge records also confirm that to be a member of a thirteenth-century Jewry was *ipso facto* to be involved in litigation and even violence oneself. Perhaps the single most startling and even audacious case is that of Abraham, another member of the Motun family, who had the temerity in or just before 1272 to lead a gang of Christians to the home of Geoffrey de Sawston, five miles south of Cambridge, in order to drive away four cattle (stots), two oxen and 106 ewes until the latter had repaid a debt of 30s od.

Geoffrey de Sawston, a man who two centuries later might well have been categorized as a member of the lesser Cambridgeshire gentry, seems representative of the Christian debtors to whom the Jews of Cambridge increasingly lent money as the thirteenth century progressed. After 1190 it is certainly more difficult, exactly as it is elsewhere in England, to discover Cambridge Jews advancing money to either the lay or ecclesiastical aristocracy as such or even to the major members of the knightly class. What the bonds deposited in the Cambridge *archa* do reveal very dramatically is the almost insatiable appetite for small-scale and initially short-term loans on the part of the county’s local, often very local, land-
owners. Not in Cambridge itself, but in villages like Babraham, Bottisham, Caldecote, Caxton, Comberton, Dry Drayton, Grantchester, Histon, Madingley, Newmarket, Sawston, Swaffham and the Shelfords were the Jews most likely to find their most substantial and assiduous clients. It has long been recognized that the economic survival of the medieval English Jews rested on the fundamental paradox that although they almost all lived in urban communities they satisfied what was essentially a non-urban, rural, need. The available Cambridge evidence supports that generalization beyond any doubt at all, provided one recognizes that in Plantagenet England the line between minor country landlord and town notable could be a very shadowy one indeed. Thus Henry Coleville and his son Philip, both at various times in debt to Cambridge Jews for sums of £40 to £50, came to dominate the area immediately north of the town as lords of both Histon and Impington. Similarly indebted to the Cambridge Jews were John de Moyne and Gilbert Peche, both sheriffs of Cambridgeshire in the 1260s who must have known their county town well. During the same decade, and more strikingly still, Cambridge Jews are known to have been lending money to Mayor John le Rus and other members of what seems to have been one of the most powerful dynasties within the borough during its first century of self-government at the king’s command.

The Cambridge evidence so carefully accumulated by Canon Stokes therefore supports the view that the major economic impact of the Jews in thirteenth-century England was to facilitate the transfer of wealth to and from the leading burgesses, themselves likely to be more or less substantial landlords, as well as among the middle ranks of English rural society. Until at least the early 1250s it also seems clear that such transactions were sufficiently numerous to reward a small group of Jewish families in Cambridge with a satisfactory if not necessarily spectacular level of profit. Thus Aaron and Isaac le Blund held positions of financial influence and authority within the Jewry in the 1240s; while Jacob and Moses de Clare were similarly prominent before the latter migrated to Sudbury in or before 1270. However, the apparently even greater fortunes of the de Senlis and Motun families seem never to have recovered from the deaths of their leading figures, Isaac and Saulot respectively, in the 1260s. No doubt by this date the cumulative effect of Henry III’s relentless royal tallages had done much to undermine the Jews’ self-confidence as well as their monetary reserves; and in this same decade it is certainly clear that the Cambridge Jews were being increasingly compelled to liquidate their once extensive holdings of real property in the town. By now it seems most likely, all allowances made for the highly obscure and controversial nature of the subject, that the greatest residuary beneficiaries of Jewish credit transactions were neither the gentry nor the Jews themselves, but rather the great religious institutions of Cambridgeshire and Cambridge, above all Barnwell Priory and the newly established Hospital of St John the Evangelist.

In her recent book on *Charity and Community in Medieval Cambridge*, much the
The Jews of medieval Cambridge

most important contribution to the history of the medieval town in recent years, Dr Miri Rubin has made the rather different point that this Hospital of St John (first mentioned in royal letters patent of 1204) ‘was part of the credit system in Cambridge from the very first years of its existence’. Might it even be argued that the hospital was deliberately founded immediately and literally across the street from the Cambridge Jewry in order to check the economic influence of the latter, to offer a Christian alternative to both its religious and its financial attractions? So interesting a possibility has to face the difficulty that the clientèle, so far as it can be identified, for the charitable loans made by the Hospital of St John, seems very different from that for the financial services of the Jews themselves. Nor is it altogether certain that the clerks who administered the hospital during its first difficult century saw the redemption of Christians from their indebtedness to the Cambridge Jews as one of their most urgent priorities.72 However, it does indeed seem highly probable that the creation of new Christian religious houses within and around the town gradually subjected those Jews to greater and greater territorial and psychological pressure. In the event, the four major orders of the mendicant friars were to be used by both Henry III and Edward I as their leading preachers against the Jewish religion, increasingly before the Jews themselves. It seems equally clear that the unexpected and unlikely emergence of a university in early-thirteenth-century Cambridge may have brought occasional short-term profit, but could bring no long-term comfort at all to the local Jewry. To a very large extent the history of Christian-Jewish relations in medieval England was always bound to be a case study in religious intolerance founded on mutual ideological incomprehension. There could be no more obvious example of this truism than the apparently complete inability of either Cambridge or Oxford Jews to engage intellectually with the masters and scholars of the new-fangled studium generale whose origins and early development they were just in time to observe.73

To this growing intellectual isolation and vulnerability, perhaps more starkly apparent in a university town like Cambridge than in the case of most English Jewries, was to be added greater financial vulnerability too. To judge by its place in lists of royal tallage assessments, the Jewish community of Cambridge during the reign of Henry III was still a financially important but no longer an outstandingly wealthy English Jewry. It may also be significant, as P. E. Elman noted long ago, that the cash value of bonds on deposit in the Cambridge archa dropped from some 2750 marks in 1240 to only 275 marks in 1260.74 To a community already showing marked signs of both demographic and economic attrition, the wave of anti-Jewish demonstrations unleashed a few years later during the baronial wars led by Simon de Montfort and his adherents seems to have been little short of catastrophic. It was apparently only in the aftermath of the battle of Evesham on 4 August 1265 that John d’Eyville and a formidable band of the Disinherited forced their way on to the Isle of Ely; and it was from their headquarters there that they then ‘used Cambridge as a supply base’, blackmailing the burgesses, terrorizing the canons of
Barnwell Priory and allegedly holding rich Jews as well as others to ransom.\textsuperscript{75} It has been less often noted that these \textit{ministri iniquitatis} actually massacred some of the Cambridge Jews on 12 August 1266, presumably just before they seized the town's \textit{archa} – in some ways an even more aggressive act – and removed it to Ely. There it presumably remained until the suppression of the dissidents on the Isle by the Lord Edward in July 1267.\textsuperscript{76} At Cambridge in 1266, as at York in 1190, it is evident enough that the desire of indebted local landlords to liquidate their debts by violence was one of the most important factors in play; but it may be even more important to suggest that the forcible seizure of the Cambridge \textit{archa} in 1266-7 demonstrated something more dangerous still – that the financial activities of the Jews there were no longer indispensable to the local population. One of the potential weaknesses of the Cambridge Jewry had long been that compared with its counterparts at, say, York, Lincoln and Oxford it was surrounded by alternative sources of Jewish credit (at Huntingdon, Bedford, Stamford, Sudbury, Thetford and even Norwich) not so many miles away.

Such considerations perhaps help to explain why only nine years later, in 1275, the life of the increasingly insecure Jewish community resident in Cambridge was brought to a sudden but apparently quiet end, abruptly deprived of what would no doubt have been a melancholy final act before the English Jewry as a whole followed it into oblivion fifteen years later. So premature a demise could hardly have been anticipated forty years earlier when the twelve-year-old Eleanor of Provence had been granted 'by way of dower the cities of Worcester and Bath, the borough and castle of Gloucester, and the boroughs of Cambridge and Huntingdon' on her marriage to Henry III in 1236.\textsuperscript{77} Although this apparently munificent gift gave Queen Eleanor no direct responsibility for judicial or financial administration within the dower towns in question, the royal farms diverted from the latter to the upkeep of her own household were an important constituent of her often inadequate income. It was therefore absolutely predictable that soon after the death of her husband Queen Eleanor's claims to the dower income she had already enjoyed for thirty-six years would be confirmed by his successor, her own son Edward I. On 17 September 1273, even before the new king had returned from his expedition to the Holy Land in order to assume his royal duties, the bailiffs and men of Cambridge were already under orders to pay their civic farm and rents to Eleanor of Provence in her new capacity as queen mother.\textsuperscript{78} Within a few months of Edward's arrival in England during the summer of 1274 a more unexpected development had occurred: by 16 January 1275 Edward I had allegedly not only acceded to his mother's request that all resident Jews should be completely expelled from her dower towns, but had decided on the destination of these exiles: under strict supervision by the county sheriffs, all the Jews of Marlborough were to be deported to Devizes, those of Gloucester to Bristol, those of Worcester to Hereford, and those of Cambridge to Norwich.\textsuperscript{79}

The expulsion of the Jewish community from Cambridge and from three of
The Jews of medieval Cambridge

Queen Eleanor of Provence’s other dower towns in 1275 undoubtedly deserves more attention than it has usually received from historians of the medieval Anglo-Jewry. Like the complete expulsion of the Jews from the English kingdom fifteen years later, it also raises extremely difficult issues of interpretation. In the first place, the sudden annihilation – for no alleged offence whatsoever on their part – of four long-established urban Jewries is an obvious demonstration, if such were needed, that in the handling of his Jewish subjects the royal lion already knew his own strength at the very beginning of his reign. It is rather more remarkable that during his very first effective year as monarch Edward I apparently experienced no qualms at the prospect of sacrificing his profits from four urban Jewries, when there were no longer more than twenty financially viable Jewish communities still active in his realm.80 The expulsions of the Jewish communities at Cambridge, Marlborough, Gloucester and Worcester accordingly deserve a certain amount of thought: they were not merely local episodes of no particular national moment. At the least, and again at the outset of his reign, Edward I seems to have abandoned a prevailing English royal assumption held throughout the previous century, that it was always in the crown’s financial interests (as at York after the massacre of 16 March 1190) to preserve wherever possible substantial Jewish communities in his own major provincial towns. It can hardly be a complete coincidence that in the Michaelmas parliament which followed the expulsion of the Jews from Queen Eleanor’s dower towns in 1275, all the Jewish *archae* throughout the country were to be sealed, and usury banned, by the so-called *Statutum de Judeismo*.81 To that extent the banishment of the Cambridge and other Jews in 1275 was an all-important moral and political warning of what might happen – as it soon did – to an English Jewry which failed to meet the more or less impossible terms of the new so-called ‘Edwardian experiment’.

In 1275, as in 1290, it is however notoriously hazardous to suppose that Edward I knew precisely what his long-term plans for his Jewish *servi camere* actually were. There were of course occasional precedents for the expulsion of Jews from isolated towns in his kingdom; and Edward must have been aware that Jews had been exiled by his father or himself from, for example, Newcastle upon Tyne in 1234, from Derby in 1261 and Bridgnorth as recently as 1274, all at the request of the local townsmen.82 The fortunes of several other urban Jewries, like those at Chichester, Wallingford and Dorchester in Oxfordshire, were also often highly precarious, to the extent that they probably failed to maintain continuity of existence for much of the thirteenth century.83 Nevertheless, the obliteration of the four considerable Jewries of Cambridge, Marlborough, Gloucester and Worcester in 1275 was self-evidently in a different order of dimension; and it seems inconceivable that Edward I and his councillors authorized so drastic a step without at least some attention to the consequences. Might indeed the expulsions of 1275 have been the result less of Queen Eleanor’s than of her son’s initiative, a *ballon d’essay* on the new sovereign’s part to discover how easily, or not, his kingdom
might survive the eviction of all its Jews? At the least, by sanctioning the ejection of the Jews from four of his mother’s dower towns at her own alleged instance, Edward could plausibly hope for some popularity among his Christian subjects as well as keep his own options open: the latter he certainly continued to do until the very summer of 1290 itself. The fact remains that in 1275 Edward I did have to accept some financial loss in the way of tallages and other profits from Jewish moneylending in his mother’s four dower towns; and it is ultimately hard to resist the impression that in the last resort the Cambridge Jewry owed its demise less to the king than to the personal hostility of Eleanor of Provence herself, that ‘strong minded woman, who did not believe that she should retire gracefully from public affairs on the death of her husband’. Queen Eleanor’s influence over her son is as well attested as is her extreme orthodoxy: she retired to the nunnery of Amesbury in 1276, took the veil herself in 1286 and only died there (in 1291) after the English Jewry was no more. To the very end, and even within the conventual walls where she was eventually buried, she may have been the most dangerous adversary of all the English, and not only the Cambridge, Jews. According to the comparatively well-informed Waverley chronicle, which comes to an abrupt halt in 1291 itself, it was at the queen mother’s own instigation (procurante domina Alienora, matre dicti regis Angliae) that the ‘exasperation’ caused by the multitude of Jews in the towns and castles of England was in 1290 finally brought to an end by their expulsion from the realm, ‘never again to direct their steps to this land’.

Nor can there be any serious doubt that the lesser expulsion of the Jewish community from Cambridge had been rigorously enforced fifteen years earlier. As by 1275 it had already become illegal, at least in theory, for English Jews to live permanently in any towns lacking a properly administered chirograph-chest, the removal of their archa to another town was disastrous to the survival of the Jews of Cambridge. It is not difficult to see why the royal government’s original intention of exiling the latter as far away as Norwich was rapidly replaced by their enforced migration to Huntingdon, only sixteen miles to the northwest of their homes near the Cam. By the end of the year, on 24 November 1275, the list of Jewish archae in the country selected for official inspection in the crown’s interest already included Huntingdon but no longer mentioned Cambridge. As a county town itself and an intermittent centre of Jewish business activity during recent decades, particularly when Manasser of Huntingdon had been a chirographer of the Bedford chest in the 1240s, Huntingdon was better placed than any conceivable alternative locale to provide what economic opportunities remained to the Jews of the area. Thus of the fines levied on the four Jewish resident communities in the region by the sheriff of Cambridgeshire as recently as 1272, Huntingdon had paid 35 od as compared to Cambridge Jewry’s 8s od and only 2s od each from the much more obscure settlements at Bottisham and Holme respectively. The influx into Huntingdon of an unascertainable number of Jewish exiles from Cambridge three years later inevitably had some effect in increasing the significance of the Huntingdon Jewry.
The Jews of medieval Cambridge

The bonds held by members of the latter were valued at almost £285 (of which £188 was expressed in money as opposed to either corn or wool) in 1291; but it is hard to avoid the impression that most of these represented old debts and that the Jews at Huntingdon must have comprised a settlement of dwindling and demoralized refugees.91

Such at least is the conclusion that seems to emerge from the last of all surviving descriptions of the contents of the Cambridge and Huntingdon archa – the detailed summaries of the bonds and charters de novis cistis prepared for the treasurer and barons of the royal exchequer in 1292–3, two years post abjuracionem eorundem a regno.92 The proper interpretation of such inventories is notoriously hazardous; but in this case there seems no doubt at all of the general and dispiriting conclusion that emerges. Of the thirty-six business transactions recorded in these ‘new chests’, no less than thirty-two relate to loans made by Jews of Cambridge (and occasionally Huntingdon) to Christian debtors twenty or so years previously, and in any case before the Statute of Jewry prohibited usurious transactions in 1275. To judge from these bonds, there accordingly still remained a considerable demand for Jewish credit among the middling tenants of the region on the very eve of the expulsion from Cambridge in 1275; but the loans in question were rarely in excess of £4 or £5, and in only one case (William of Orwell’s seven separate debts to Mosse fil’ Deulecres) can one detect the possibility of real insolvency on the part of a Christian borrower. As for the four bonds in the archa dating from after 1275, all the recorded debts were expressed in terms of wool or grain rather than of cash and all were under the names of two Jews only, Manser le Chapleyn of Huntingdon, and Josce son of Saulot, designated a Jew of London.93

No doubt the bonds to be found in an official chirograph chest shortly after the 1290 expulsion are among the least likely of documents to reveal possible Jewish evasion of royal legislation against moneylending; but the nature of those bonds in the case of this Cambridge and Huntingdon archa leaves little doubt that after the traumas of 1275 Jewish business activity in the region had not only disintegrated but was increasingly restricted to a very small handful of Jews indeed.

Of those few survivors undoubtedly the most important was Josce son of Saulot, the last member of the medieval Cambridge Jewry known to have left a personal imprint on a now doomed community. Although little can today be known in detail about the vagaries of Josce’s career, his final years can certainly serve to illustrate – like those of his northern contemporary Bonamy of York – the curiously haphazard and pathetic way in which the history of the medieval English Jewry came to an end.94 Alternatively known as Josce son of Samuelotus or as Josce the Jew of Bridge Street in the parish of the Holy Sepulchre, he was almost certainly the eldest son and heir of Saulot Motun, whose violent death in the mid-1260s has already been noticed. During the early 1270s Josce son of Saulot had secured what remained of his father’s inheritance; but in 1275 he was compelled to migrate with his fellow Cambridge Jews to Huntingdon, where he was accused in the following
R. B. Dobson

year of aiding and abetting a robbery. More unexpectedly, on 4 February 1277 the sheriff of Cambridgeshire was ordered by the royal government to allow Joceus, son of Samuellotus, to live with his household in the village of Chesterton on the outskirts of Cambridge: from that village Josce was to be permitted full access to Cambridge ‘in order to conduct his business there and to repair the houses that he has in the same town’. At the very least, this entry in the close rolls leaves no doubt that it was possible for Jews to hold property and presumably lend money within towns where they no longer lived; but it seems equally obvious that by 1277 Queen Eleanor’s expulsion of all Jewish persons from permanent residence in Cambridge itself was being rigidly implemented. Josce son of Saulot was probably not the only member of the English Jewry to observe the final destruction of his community’s assets from suburban side-lines.

Nor is it at all surprising that after Edward I’s final solution of 1290 it was their houses which proved to be much the most enduring legacy of the Jews of medieval Cambridge to posterity. According to the sheriff of Cambridgeshire’s final inquisition into Jewish property, by 1290 there was only one exception to the rule that ‘no other Jew holds other lands or tenements in the county of Cambridge’, that exception being – predictably enough – Josce son of Saulot. The latter’s houses (domibus) in Bridge Street, apparently worth 20s od a year, passed after the expulsion of the Jews from England to John But, mayor of Cambridge for several years both before and after 1290. Nothing could have been more appropriate; for it is indeed altogether obvious from the famous survey of the town provided by the Hundred Rolls in 1279 that in the first instance the leading burgesses of Cambridge were the most significant residuary legatees of the material remains of the Jewry lately in their midst. Before long, moreover, some of those ex-Jewish tenements and messuages (and in particular the rents therefrom) were to play a not unimportant part in the complicated property transactions which underpinned the first colleges of the university. However, the as yet unwritten history of Jewish property in Cambridge after 1290, despite its importance to the development of the medieval borough, has little relevance to the history of the Jews of medieval Cambridge themselves. In retrospect that history must surely be seen as an obscurely understood struggle for existence against increasingly overwhelming odds. Only sentiment perhaps could persuade one that it might have been otherwise, that the opportunities for mutual understanding between Christians and Jews in thirteenth-century England could have been seized rather than ignored. Canon Stokes himself derived some final consolation from his assumption that relations between Christians and Jews in Cambridge were apparently less violent than in most medieval English towns. Perhaps so; but the even more obvious moral of his story (and of this) is of surprise that those Jews were able to survive, and occasionally to flourish, as long as they did.
The Jews of medieval Cambridge

NOTES

4 See the bibliography of Roth’s published work (to 1966) in Remember the Days: Essays on Anglo-Jewish History presented to Cecil Roth by members of the Council of the Jewish Historical Society of England ed. J. B. Shaftesley (IJHE 1966).
5 Dr Lipman’s The Jews of Medieval Norwich (IJHE 1967) still perhaps remains the last absolutely major contribution to knowledge of the medieval English Jewry. By contrast the Jews of Capetian France have received much more attention than those of England in the last twenty years (see, e.g., Medieval Jewish Life, Studies from the Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research ed. R. Chazan [New York 1976]; N. Golb, Les Juifs de Rouen au Moyen Age [Rouen 1985]). More recently, the more or less simultaneous publication of Professor Gavin Langmuir’s History, Religion and Antisemitism (Berkeley 1990) and Towards a Definition of Antisemitism (Berkeley 1990) obviously marks a watershed in the general study of relations between medieval Christians and Jews. Professor Robert Stacey and Dr Robin Mundell are among the several historians currently engaged in important new research on the history of the medieval English Jewry.
8 H. P. Stokes, Cambridge outside Trumpton Gates before the foundation of Peterhouse (Cambridge Antiq. Soc., octavo series, XLIV, 1908); Cambridge outside the Barnwell Gate (ibid., octavo series, XLVII, 1915).
10 Ibid. 203–4.
14 For an interesting example of a provincial Jewry which seems to have become more rather than less prosperous during the first half of the thirteenth century, see J. Hillaby, ‘The Worcester Jewry, 1158–1200: Portrait of a Lost Community’ Trans. of Worcestershire Archaeological Soc., 3rd ser., XII (1909) 73–122.
17 On the tenurial history of Cambridge and its hinterland there has been surprisingly little research since the publication of H. M. Cam, Liberties and Communities in Medieval England: Collected Studies in Local Administration and Topography (Cambridge 1933) and even of F. W. Maitland, Township and Borough (Cambridge 1898).
18 Thus the detailed topographical account of the Oxford Jewry which is to be found in Cecil Roth’s Jews of Medieval Oxford is heavily indebted to H. E. Salters highly original (and posthumously published) Survey of Oxford, ed. W. A. Pantin (Oxford Hist. Soc., new ser., 14, 20, 1960–9).
19 For a photograph of perhaps the single most interesting original starr in the history of the
Cambridge Jewry (a quittance of 1 November 1264, whereby Abraham son of Samuel released to Thomas de Ho, clerk, a message near the future site of Peterhouse, in whose archives the document was later preserved), see Stokes (see n. 9) 159–61. In his ‘Two Hebrew Charters at St John’s College’, The Eagle (St John’s College) XLVII, no. 209, pp. 73–82, the late Herbert Loewe maintained — too optimistically — that careful search in collegiate and other deed-rooms would disclose many stars that have so far escaped notice.


21 All but ten of the fifty or so surviving plea rolls of the Jewish exchequer date from the reign of Edward I: see Jenkinson (see n. 6) 5–6. The comparative profusion of evidence for the last phase of the Anglo-Jewry’s existence emerges very clearly indeed in R. R. Mundill, ‘The Jews in England, 1272–1290’ (University of St Andrews, Department of Medieval History, PhD thesis, 1987).


24 Life of St William (see n. 22) 93–4. Joseph Jacobs pointed out (‘St William’, p. 752) that the legend of the nasi or Jewish king resident at Narbonne was unlikely to be known by anyone in East Anglia who was not a Jew; cf. S. W. Baron, Social and Religious History of the Jews (2nd edn, New York 1952–76) IV, pp. 46–8, 258–9.


26 Life of St William (see n. 22) lxxi–lxii. It seems difficult to believe that Thomas of Monmouth could have invented an ex-Jew of Cambridge who later became a Norwich monk without the collusion of the cathedral clergy of the city; see D. J. Miller, ‘The Development of the Ritual Murder Accusation in the Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries’ (University of Cambridge, Faculty of History, MPhil in Medieval History, 1991), 8.

27 Life of St William (see n. 22) 94.


32 Liber Eliensis, ed. E. O. Blake (Camden 3rd Ser., 1962) 339; H. Wharton, Anglia Sacra (London 1691) I, 625, 045–6; Stokes (see n. 9) 124–5.

33 Richardson (see n. 29) 9; Lipman (see n. 5) 4.

34 Materials for the History of Thomas Becket (Rolls Series, 61, 1875–85) III, 19; Jacobs (see n. 3) 27–8.

35 Stokes (see n. 9) 126, corrects the misreading in Jacobs (see n. 3) 28.


37 Richardson (see n. 29) 10, 67, 82.

38 Jacobs (see n. 3) 44–5, 66, 350; Stokes (see n. 9) 128–9.


40 PRO, E. 101, 249/2; Stokes (see n. 9) 248.

41 T. Madox, The History and Antiquities of the Exchequer (London 1769) I, pp. 155, 219; Stokes (see n. 9) 135–6.

42 Roth (see n. 11) 136, 149; cf. Encyclopaedia Judaica, IV, col. 534.

43 Lipman (see n. 5) 142–61; Dobson (see n. 28) 42–3; R. Stacey, Politics, Policy and Finance under Henry III, 1216–1245 (Oxford 1987) 132–50.

R. B. Dobson
The Jews of medieval Cambridge

44 PRO, E. 101, 249/2; Stokes (see n. 9) 248; Lipman (see n. 5) 6.

45 H. M. Chew, 'A Jewish Aid to Marry, A.D. 1221' Trans JHSE XI (1928) 99-111; Lipman (see n. 5) 6. The list of Jewish tax collectors surviving as PRO E.101, 249/12, and printed by Stokes (see n. 9) 250-1, as 'Tallage Receipts in Cambridge (1210)', actually dates from 1241.

46 Dobson (see n. 28) 6-17.

47 It remains hard to believe that the Cambridge Jews can have remained completely inviolate in 1190. According to the most precise account of these atrocities, large numbers of Jews were killed at Norwich on 6 February, at Stamford on 7 March, at York on 16 March and at Bury St Edmunds on 18 March: Radulphi de Dicto Opera Historica (Rolls Series, 68, 1876) II, pp. 69, 75-6; cf. Pipe Roll 2 Richard I, t. 116; Pipe Rolls 3 and 4 Richard I, 147, 203, 313 (Pipe Roll Society, 1925-6).

48 Stokes, 'Records possessed by the Jews' Trans JHSE VIII (1918) 89.

49 Thomas Eccleston, De Adventu Fratrum Minorum in Anglia ed. A. G. Little (new edn, Manchester 1951) 22.

50 C. H. Cooper, Annals of Cambridge I (Cambridge 1842) 39-40; cf. C. Cl. R. 1237-41, 61; 1247-51, 34. By 1238 Henry III had allowed the Friars Minor to occupy the whole of what was still known as 'the house that belonged to Benjamin the Jew' and licensed the Cambridge bailiffs to spend 10 marks from the borough's farm on building a new gaol (Cam. Liberate Roll, 1226-40) 338.


52 Cooper (see n. 50) I, 40, n. 1; cf. idem, Memorials of Cambridge III (Cambridge 1860-6) 133; Stokes (see n. 9) 114; Dobson (see n. 31) 12, n. 80.

53 The results of the 1983 excavation of the Jewbury cemetery are in process of being prepared for publication by the York Archaeological Trust. The evidence for medieval Jewish cemeteries elsewhere in England is most usefully summarized in M. B. Honeybourne, 'The Pre-Excommunication Cemetery of the Jews in London' Trans JHSE XX (1964) 145-59, and Hillaby (see n. 14) 97.

54 Stokes (see n. 9) 120-1; Stokes (see n. 48) 89-90; cf. R. Willis and J. W. Clark, The Architectural History of the University of Cambridge III (Cambridge 1886) 229-44.

55 The single most significant surviving place-name reference to the Cambridge Jewry is to be found in a late-thirteenth-century grant to the nuns of St Radegund's priory which mentions a tenement in vico Judeorum qui descendit a via usque ad cimiterium Omnia Sanctorum: A. Gray, The Priory of St Radegund, Cambridge (Cambridgeshire and the Isle of Ely (English Place-Name Soc., XIX, 1943) 44.

56 British Library, Lansdowne MS 826, fol. 28; Rotulorum Originalium Abbreviatio (Record Commission, 1825-10) I, 74.


58 Lobel (see n. 31) 9-10; T. D. Atkinson, Cambridge Described and Illustrated (Cambridge 1897) 10.

59 Liber Memorandum de Bernewelle, 285, 297; Stokes (see n. 9) 166.


61 Rotuli Hundredorum (Record Commission, 1812-18) 392.

62 Cal. Jewish Plea Rolls (see n. 60) I, 279, 282; and for Geoffrey de Sawston's debts to the de Sancto Licio (Senlis) family in 1270, see Rigg (see n. 60) 53-4.

63 See, e.g., Lipman (see n. 5) 79-94; Dobson (see n. 15) 39-40; Hillaby (see n. 14) 101-6.

64 This conclusion emerges absolutely clearly from the most important source for moneylending by the Cambridge Jewry, a lengthy account endorsed 'Cantebrigg. Debita Judeorum, 8-24 Henrici III' (PRO, E. 101, 249/3, fully and accurately transcribed in Stokes (see n. 9) 252-75).

65 PRO, E. 101, 249/3 provides much the most copious geographical detail; but also see Rigg (see n. 60) 53-4, 69; Cal. Jewish Plea Rolls (see n. 60) I, 12, 53, 179-80, 236, 246, 245, 252, 258; II, 117; III, 220.

66 Cal. Jewish Plea Rolls (see n. 60) I, 70, 91-2, 269; II, 61; Rot. Hund. (see n. 61) II, 411-13; Victoria County History, Cambridgeshire IX (1986) 44, 95-103, 131, 133, 157, 180, 236.

67 Rigg (see n. 60) 112; Cal. Jewish Plea Rolls (see n. 60) I, 110, 258; II, 314. The thirteenth-century mayors of Cambridge demand much more investigation than they have ever received, even by Cam in her Liberty and Communities (see
n. 17) 19–26; but for John le Rus and his family (allegedly so deeply in debt to the Jews in 1253 that they abandoned their large stone house with court and chapel for a smaller home nearby) see Gray (see n. 55) 117; Stokes, Cambridge outside Trumpington (see n. 8) 31–43; Liber Memorandum de Berenecelle (see n. 20) 218.

68 Cal. Jewish Plea Rolls (see n. 60) I, 70, 91–2, 179, 234; Rigg (see n. 60) 41; C.P.R., 1257–58, 440, 443; Stokes (see n. 9) 140, 145–6.

69 Rigg (see n. 60) 53–4, 85; Cal. Jewish Plea Rolls (see n. 60) I, 134, 150, 152, 154, 156, 163, 236, 241, 249, 279, 282. It was on behalf of Milla, widow of Saulot Motun, that the 'masters of the Jewish law' appeared before the justices of the Jews to annul her second and controversial marriage to Master Samuel of Bolum: M. Adler, 'The Jewish Woman in Medieval England', reprinted in Jews of Medieval England (see n. 15) 22–3.

70 Liber Memorandum de Berenecelle (see n. 20) passim; Rot. Hund. (see n. 61) II, 356–92; Stokes (see n. 9) 166, 183, 195.


72 Ibid., 176, stresses 'the fear of contact with secular society' at the hospital.


74 P. Elman, 'The Economic Causes of the Expulsion of the Jews in 1290' Economic History Review VII (1957) 147–8; C.P.R. 1247–58, 441–4; Lipman (see n. 5) 5–6.

75 Annales Monastici (see n. 1) II, 371; Victoria County History, City and University of Cambridge (1950) 5–6; Liber Memorandum de Berenecelle (see n. 20) 122.


77 C.Ch.R., 1226–57, 218.

78 C.CLR., 1272–79, 31; cf. C.P.R., 1272–81, 12, 27.

79 C.P.R., 1272–81, 75–6; Rigg (see n. 60) 85.

80 Roth (see n. 28) 91–2; Richardson (see n. 29) 16–20.

81 Statutes of the Realm, I, 221–3: in the light of recent research it has become increasingly obvious that the statute was by no means rigidly observed.

82 C.CLR., 1231–34, 466, 515; 1234–37, 20, 225, 425; 1242–47, 149; 1272–79, 130; Roth (see n. 28) 158, 82.

83 Richardson (see n. 29) 14–17.

84 For the argument that Edward I probably made the irreversible decision to expel all his Jewish subjects only just before his parliament assembled on 15 July 1290, see Dobson (see n. 15) 46.

85 Prestwich (see n. 76) 122.

86 Ibid., 122–3; for a characteristically more benevolent view of this somewhat enigmatic queen, see F. M. Powicke, The Thirteenth Century, 1216–1290 (Oxford 1953) 73–4.

87 Annales Monastici (see n. 1) II, 409.

88 C.CLR., 1277–79, 312–13; Statutes of Realm (see n. 81) I, 221–3; Richardson (see n. 29) 19–21.

89 C.P.R., 1272–81, 126. Similarly, Cambridge no longer figured among those Jews compelled to contribute to a royal tallage in the autumn of 1276 (PRO, E. 401, no. 1572).

90 Rigg (see n. 60) 68–9; cf. Victoria County History, Huntingdonshire II (1932) 351; Victoria County History, Bedfordshire I (1904) 321.

91 Stokes (see n. 9) 196.

92 PRO, E. 101, 250/3, only summarized in Stokes (see n. 9) 280.

93 PRO, E. 101, 250/3.

94 Unlike Bonamy of York (Dobson [see n. 15] 45–6), Josce son of Samuelus does not seem to have survived until 1290 (Stokes [see n. 9] 191–2).

95 Cal. Jewish Plea Rolls (see n. 60) II, 104, 115, 116, 150, 173; III, 50, 113, 158, 243, 303.

96 C.CLR., 1272–79, 370; Stokes (see n. 9) 192.

97 According to Hugh de Kendal's account (PRO, E. 101, 250/1) of Jewish property sold on the king's behalf immediately after the expulsion of 1290, there were then still enough Jewish houses in Cambridge to bring in a profit of £16 13s 4d; cf. Richardson (see n. 29) 19–21.

98 British Library, Lansdowne MS 826, fol. 28; Rot. Orig. Abbrv., I, 74; Stokes (see n. 9) 197.

99 For the most recent and most sophisticated example, see C. Hall and R. Lovatt, 'The Site and Foundation of Peterhouse' Proc. of Cambridge Antiq. Soc. LXXXVIII (1989) 5–46.

100 Stokes (see n. 9) 201–2. I am most grateful to Professor Christopher Brooke, Dr Rosemary Horrox and Dr Anna Abulafia for their most helpful comments on this paper.