

Tour of Jewish Amersham

This walk is based on Vivien Samson's guided tour of Jewish Amersham August 2013

Welcome to the story of the Jewish community in Amersham, and surrounding areas, during World War Two. Let's begin with the arrival of Jewish people in Buckinghamshire...

AMERSHAM STATION - Stop 1

This Metropolitan line station has been the place for arrivals and departures for over one hundred and fifty years. The year was 1939, a beautiful sunny day on the third of September, but the news was about to change ordinary life as they knew it. Neville Chamberlain, British Prime Minister, announced over the radio waves the dreaded news that Germany has refused to take the path of peace and marched into Poland. Britain was at war.

Amersham Railway Station was a significant landmark for those whose course of life would take a new direction. The station entrance today is the same, but then steam would bellow out of the funnels, whistles blew, trains chugged, people were hustling and bustling, porters running around, men going off to war, saying goodbye to loved ones – would they ever meet again?

People were being evacuated to the country, where it was safer. Three hundred Jewish children were evacuated to Amersham at this time! How would you feel if you had to leave your home and life as you knew it, with the knowledge that your house could be bombed? You may have had to leave your friends and pets behind, and children may have come without their parents to live up to five years with people who were previously unknown to them. Some families in the Jewish community managed to stay together. Others came alone. It mustn't be all doom and gloom. Britain would not be beaten by Jerry. Let's go and have a jolly good time at the theatre.

Directions to the theatre: (0.1 miles)

From the station entrance, turn left under the railway bridge. The old theatre is now the Amersham Auction House, 125 Station Road, on the left hand side as you walk downhill.

Amersham Rep Theatre (The Playhouse) - Stop 2

During the war, there was no TV, so people had to entertain themselves. Without the modern technology that we have today people had to find alternative entertainment. Several members of the Jewish community came to this building, today an auction house, which used to be The Amersham Playhouse. They came to this theatre to act and to be entertained. Many plays were produced here, including *Rebecca* by Daphne De Maurier.

Members of the Amersham Synagogue, remember Dirk Bogarde. One evacuee, Ivor Deitchman, recalled travelling to London with him on the train. Many other well-known actors started their careers at this theatre. Money was scarce in the 1940's, so sadly it closed down after the war. In order to bring light into people's lives, just after the war, George Marks, another member of the Jewish community, founded today's Amersham Playgoers. They meet at the Amersham Community Centre to this very day. George passed away in May 2006 aged 92. He was actively involved with the group for most of that time, directing and appearing in over one hundred plays. Now, unfortunately for some, we are going back to school.

Directions to the school (0.2 miles)

From Amersham Auction House, cross to the other side of the road. Walk uphill, under the railway bridge, and continue along Station Road, crossing the road on the corner with Rectory Hill, taking you onto Chesham Road. The school is on the left.

Dr Challoner's Grammar School - Stop 3

In 1937 Dr Challoner's had become part of the state system for the first time since its establishment in 1624. During the war, both girls and boys were admitted to this school. Today this building is for boys only. Many pupils of the Amersham

Synagogue used to attend here, including Ivor Deitchman, who was in the school's cricket team. One of his class mates was Channoch Ehrentreau, who later became head of the United Synagogue's Beth Din add link. The head boy of Dr Challoner's was Maurice Bloch, who qualified as a doctor and worked in London. Dr Bloch belonged to the more orthodox Chesham Jewish Community, part of the Federation Synagogue. Maurice's older brother was Rev. Sonnie Bloch who sometimes took services at the Amersham Synagogue. David Stamler was another classmate, who went on to become the Head of Carmel College, a Jewish boarding school.

Pupils had to carry their gas masks to school in a brown box on a string. The Government issued them to every citizen and they had to be carried with them by law. The children would have had to practise wearing their masks, as it was feared the Germans were going to release gas and kill people with it. They also practised going to the shelters in the event of an air raid. Bombs did fall over Amersham, and one landed in the playing fields of Dr Challoner's.

In many schools where children had been evacuated in large numbers, schooldays would have been divided, so that children would have had either a morning or an afternoon at school, because they couldn't accommodate everybody at the same time. Many Jewish children came from London schools and after a half day at school might well have gone to Jewish and Hebrew lessons in the afternoons, and always on Sundays. Enough of the education already! Let's go to the pictures.

On the way to the cinema, imagine Sycamore Road in the war years. We would have seen people dressed in what today we call vintage clothing. There wouldn't have been many, if any, cars because of petrol rationing. Instead, you would have seen cyclists and even one or two horses. Shop fronts would have looked empty for lack of items to sell. Don't trip over the sandbags whilst window shopping!

Rumour might have spread that the greengrocer has oranges in, so queues of housewives and children could have formed along Chiltern Parade for the rare treat. The long line of shops, on the left-hand side of the street, were built by Sainsburys and opened in 1928. Everyone had to pay the same for their goods. There was no shopping around for the best prices.

Close to the Regent cinema was a Wartime Food Office. It was also very close to the synagogue. This is where ration books were issued to every single adult and child. Every six months people had to be issued with a new book. In that Amersham window were displays of dried milk, concentrated orange juice and the unpopular, disgusting tasting, cod-liver oil!

Directions to the cinema (0.2 miles)

From Dr Challoner's Grammar School follow Chesham Road onto the main high street of Sycamore Road. Continue to the far end until the right-hand side, outside St Michael and All Angels Church, directly opposite Iceland, 75 Sycamore Rd.

REGENT CINEMA (Iceland) - STOP 4

Pack up all your troubles and try to forget there's a war on by coming to the pictures, join the hundreds of people who worked hard toward the war effort but needed a couple of hours of escapism to help them face their troubles. This was a time for dreaming, romanticising, watching the action on the big screen, or taking your eyes off for a bit of courting.

There was a seven-hundred seats cinema here during the war. One little Jewish boy spent hours in that cinema, and the very next day would be re-enacting Western films with local children on Amersham Common.

There was a siren by the Regent Cinema in Sycamore Road that was used to warn of air raids, and after the war it was used to call out the fire brigade. The shelter was built in October 1940 and accommodated fifty people. (*Bucks County Archives*). When the bombers were approaching Amersham the sirens started up with their eerie wailing, and people would run to the air raid shelters. People had also built shelters in their gardens, and if they didn't have a shelter they would dive under the table! Some brave souls became ARP (Air Raid Precaution) wardens in this area, a few of them also happened to be Jewish. Raoul Amar was awarded a Long Service Award for his contribution to civil defence in 1967 which started when he was an ARP warden in Little Chalfont during the war.

Directions to the Synagogue

From St Michael and All Angels Church, continue, the short distance, to the corner of Sycamore Road where it meets Woodside Road. Turn the corner outside the row of shops. On the opposite side of the road you can see Amersham Free Church. Look for the wooden arch between the houses.

SYNAGOGUE SITE – AMERSHAM HEBREW CONGREGATION (known as Woodside Hall) - STOP 5

Across the road, where the Free Church now stands, was the bowling green where, Ivan, a Jewish boy, would sneak a look at the bowlers. The bowling green is now in Hervines Park. Between the shops and houses is a wooden archway which was the walkway to the synagogue. The Amersham Hebrew Congregation built the synagogue in 1942. Prior to this, the Jewish evacuees and refugees had met in people's homes and St Leonard's Church Hall, Chesham Bois for prayers, cheder, (religion school) and socials.

This was not only a synagogue but also a communal hall for the Jewish people living here. The main use was for religious education for one hundred children in the Amersham area. Originally, at the height of the evacuation, there had been three hundred Jewish children. There was a social club and kosher canteen for Jewish members of the armed forces who were stationed nearby. Each family in the congregation would invite two men to their homes for Shabbat (Sabbath) meals and the Yom Tovim (Holy Days). Kosher meat was bought in London and High Wycombe. How wonderful, in those circumstances, for these Jewish servicemen, whatever their age, to have such a warm welcome into the Jewish community.

Can you imagine what it must be like to be a young person, to be away from your home and your parents, fighting in a war? What would you feel like in these circumstances? Despite all the negative feelings, some younger children who didn't understand the politics of war enjoyed the excitement of dogfights battles in the sky, collecting shrapnel, playing on crashed planes and generally making the best out of exceptional circumstances.

The rearmost section of the synagogue hall was divided from the main portion, and the latter curtained off when required, which gave accommodation for three separate classes, for the time the children weren't at school, used on three or four days of each week. On other occasions, including Shabbat, (Sabbath, the day of rest, beginning at sunset on Friday and ending sunset on Saturday) the main body, with the curtains withdrawn, were used as the central place of worship for all the Jewish community in the district. The hall was also available for social functions, and the then Rev, I Rapaport, called it a "war nursery and army hut." rather than a synagogue.

The grounds of the synagogue were donated by the Hirschfeld family and the Kahan family donated timber. The furniture came from bombed out synagogues in London. There was a canteen in the Pioneer Hall (The 1st Chesham Bois Scout hut) in Bois Lane, Chesham Bois run by a committee of Jewish ladies. Children could get a good dinner for 4d, and adults for 1/- . How much was one shilling worth? (Answer ... 5p.)

During the course of the war there were three reverends serving at this synagogue. Two went on to become rabbis. They also had a chazzan (cantor) with a beautiful tenor voice. Several barmitzvahs (a coming-of-age in which a thirteen-year-old boy may read from the Torah - Old Testament) took place at this synagogue, during WW2, right here, in Amersham. Food was strictly rationed, so the party afterwards might not match the feast of today. In fact, some did not have a party. Also, when it was dark, no light, not even a chink could be on show for the Germans to see where to drop their bombs. So after the party, you'd have to make your own way home in the blackout with no light to guide you except for the stars. On cloudy nights it could have been as black as when you shut your eyes tight. What's more, today you probably don't have to worry about your family and about people that have been left behind under a dictatorship. You don't live under the fear of air raids. Of course, for Jewish boys becoming men, they may have had a growing awareness of the great danger posed by Hitler invading Britain, and if he did that you knew that your liberty and life would be no more. For a long time it was a genuine threat that Hitler would take control of Britain. If Hitler had succeeded, none of the Jewish people would be here today.

Directions to the emergency services (0.1 miles)

Continue along the pavement all the way down the length of Woodside Road, crossing Chiltern Avenue just opposite the ambulance station. Turn into the road that leads to The Chiltern Pools leisure centre. Opposite to the ancient Barn Hall is the St John Ambulance building.

ST JOHN'S AMBULANCE - STOP 6

Kurt Nathan, a member of the Amersham Synagogue who lived at Torwood Clifton Road, Chesham Bois set up this branch of the St John's Ambulance Brigade. There is a room named after him inside the building. Just look through the window by the entrance to see his name prominently displayed above the hall doors. Mr Nathan also served as Cadets Divisional Superintendent. He and his wife, like some other Jewish volunteers, were also Amersham air-raid wardens.

During the war, the volunteers of St John's would have attended to casualties after bombing raids. They had training sessions in first aid. Ambulances were not allowed to have lights showing because of the blackout which made it very dangerous to drive. Mainly women had to do the driving, first aid, digging people out, and lifting people onto stretchers away from bomb sites. The women did a great deal of the work as most healthy men were away fighting. Between them, the two main first aid charities, St John's Ambulance and the Red Cross cared for thousands of people on the Home Front.

Directions to King George V Playing Field

With the St John Ambulance building on your left continue straight ahead following the grass verge until you enter the playing field.

King George V Playing Field - STOP 7

Do you think this field would have looked the same as it did during the war years? If you said, 'yes' – that was the wrong answer! There would have been no swings and playthings, more like land girls and haystacks! Every bit of land would have been utilised for growing food. A bomb landed in this very field.

The woods surrounding Amersham were filled with Prisoner of War camps and military camps. The Home Guard trained locally, complete with broomsticks instead of guns! They also dug trenches, signs of which can still be spotted around the woods and fields today, such as in Rectory Wood ([link to relevant pages](#)).

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