

Righting Historic Wrongs

On the 800th anniversary of the 1222 Council of Oxford, **Rebecca Abrams** considers its implications for the Jews of England

What must medieval Jewish magnate David of Oxford have been thinking as he sat in his stone mansion in Great Jewry Street on the morning of 11 June 1222? The Archbishop of Canterbury, Stephen Langton, was also in Oxford that day, presiding over a meeting of the Oxford Synod, the church council, attended by all the leading clerics of the day. On the meeting's agenda were the anti-Jewish measures announced in 1215 at the Fourth Lateran Council in Rome by Pope Honorius III, and reiterated in 1218. One of the prime movers of the Fourth Lateran Council's anti-Jewish measures had been Stephen Langton himself.

These stipulated that Jews throughout Christian Europe should be banned from holding public office, hiring Christian servants, entering churches, and eating or drinking with Christians. The papal bull also demanded that they must henceforth wear a distinctive badge in public, marking them out as Jews. In March 1218, England's 11-year-old king, Henry III, became the first European monarch to mandate the 'badge of shame', issuing orders that "all Jews, wherever they walk or ride, in or outside the town, should wear on their chest, on their outer garments, two emblems in the form of white tablets made of linen cloth, or parchment, so that in this way Jews may be clearly distinguished from Christians".

The order was sent to the sheriffs of Oxfordshire, Gloucestershire, Warwickshire, Lincolnshire, and Northamptonshire, and the mayor and sheriffs of London. But clearly Pope Honorius III was not satisfied. A year before the Oxford Synod, in April 1221, he demanded the enforcement of his decrees regarding the Jews.

Anti-Jewish sentiment was on the rise in many countries at this time, enflamed in part by the crusades. Although Stephen Langton had previously forbidden attacks on Jews by English crusaders, religious 'pilgrims' on their way to the Holy Land had continued to do so without sanction. In June 1221, crusaders had attacked the Jewish quarter in Erfurt in Germany, razing two synagogues to the ground and killing 26 Jews. Many others committed suicide rather than face forced conversion (as the Jews of York had done three decades before in the appalling massacre of 1190).

The general climate for Jews was not much more favourable in England. On 17 April 1222, less than two months before the Synod meeting, a Christian deacon called Robert of Reading had

been burnt at the stake in Oxford for converting to Judaism in order to marry a Jewish woman. Now Archbishop Langton was in Oxford, and neither David nor his contemporaries could have had many illusions about what the consequences might be for the Jews of England.

The Synod took place at Osney Abbey, at that time the most imposing building in Oxford. Larger even than the castle, it was described by one medieval visitor as "a most beautiful and large fabric, second to none in the kingdom ... Not only the envy of other religious houses, but of most beyond the sea".

The outcome of the Synod was far reaching for the English clergy, and its reforms would come to be known as the Magna Carta of English canon law. But the Synod's decisions also had profound and highly negative consequences for the Jews. The council upheld the papal bull and forbade the Jews henceforth from building new synagogues, employing Christian servants, mixing socially with Christians, or holding public office. It also mandated the wearing of the 'badge of shame'.

In reality most of these new rules were not immediately enforced, or even enforceable. There were no Jewish ghettos in medieval England, and Jews and Christians existed cheek by jowl in many towns throughout the realm. They lived in adjacent houses, walked the same streets, bought their food in the same markets, and traded at the same regional fairs. Christians made use of Jewish scholars in their study of the Bible, and Jews made use of Christian artists to illuminate



Plaster maquette of Stephen Langton by the Victorian sculptor John Thomas.

Canterbury Museums

"... the Synod's decisions also had profound and highly negative consequences for the Jews."

Illustration from the Rochester Chronicle depicting the expulsion of Jews following the Edict of Expulsion by Edward I. Note the badge in the form of two white tablets.

British Library

their own sacred texts. Jewish moneylenders and pawnbrokers were also an essential source of credit for people of all religious persuasions and from all walks of life.

Even the hated badge was at first rarely imposed. Instead, many individual Jews as well as whole communities were able to negotiate to pay a fine not to wear the badge, a win-win that provided useful extra income for the Church.

But the Synod decrees of 1222 nevertheless created a dangerous template for official anti-Jewish measures in England from then on. As the 13th century progressed, these measures were applied with increasing determination by Church and Crown. Religious animosity towards Jews in general and resentment towards Jewish moneylenders in particular found expression in blood libel accusations, executions, and violent attacks on Jewish communities. By the 1250s, with the country heading for its second major constitutional crisis and antisemitism on the rise, the 1222 decrees were reissued and this time more stringently imposed, resulting in ever greater suffering and misery for England's Jewish population.

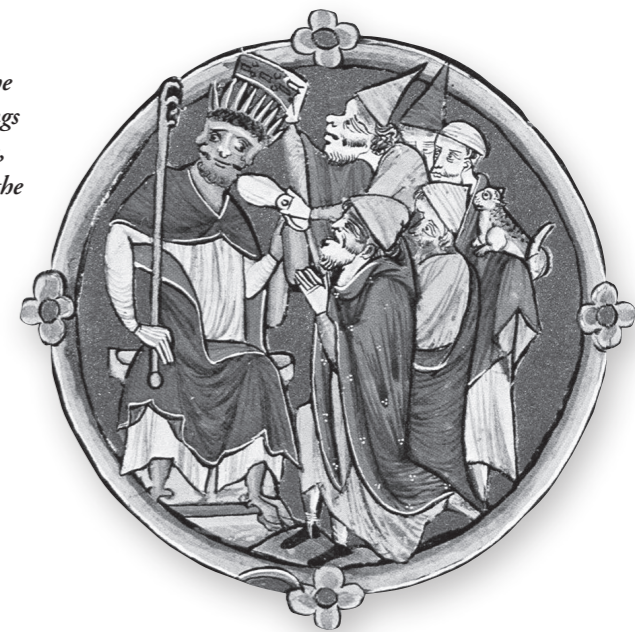
Centuries before the Windrush generation, the English state had already perfected the dismal art of the hostile environment to drive out unwanted 'foreigners' by instituting ever harsher limits on Jewish social and economic activity. The noose of anti-Jewish legislation grew progressively tighter from 1253 on (just as it would seven centuries later in Germany in the 1930s), and culminated in 1275 in the catastrophic Statutes of Jewry, which decreed that Jews were forbidden to own or rent property other than the one they lived in, were no longer allowed to inherit assets of any kind, and were now banned from all forms of moneylending.

The 1275 statutes rang the death knell for medieval Anglo-Jewry. An unholy alliance of religious zeal, fiscal reform, and financial need, they combined in the mind of one man, the powerful new king Edward I, encouraged by his equally zealous and rapacious wife, Eleanor of Castile and their religious advisors. The interests of Church and Crown were perfectly aligned from then on to make life for the Jews not just difficult but increasingly impossible.

Mass arrests during the coin-clipping scandal of 1278–79, in which around 600 Jews were imprisoned and 269 Jews were executed, amounted to a full-scale anti-Jewish pogrom. Just 12 years later, in July 1290, King Edward ordered the mass expulsion of what remained of the once thriving Anglo-Norman Jewish community, and on 1 November of that year, the last English Jews fled the country on pain of death.

Roundel detail from the Commentary to II Kings from a Bible moralisée, circa 1225, depicting the Antichrist attended by caricatured Jews.

Austrian National Library



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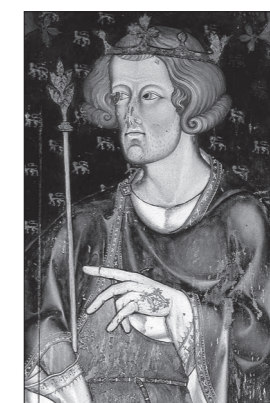
The treatment of the Jews of England might be little more than a deplorable footnote in the history books were it not for the fact that many of the negative stereotypes and prejudices of the 13th century persisted in the English Christian imagination long after the Jews themselves had gone. Entrenched in the myths of ritual murder and host desecration, they were enshrined in stained glass, statuary, and common folklore.

Nor were these prejudices confined to England. The 1222 Synod may have been following orders from the Pope in Rome, but the model of anti-Jewish legislation that followed would be exported to other European countries who from then on followed suit. State-sanctioned antisemitism (compounded by random acts of anti-Jewish violence) was one of England's most shameful and least acknowledged early mass exports.

This year, in a remarkable if belated act of recognition, the Church of England is marking the 800th anniversary of the 1222 Oxford Synod by making a formal apology for its role in disseminating and inculcating antisemitism.

As the historian Tony Kushner has pointed out, the apology, however welcome, is a little strange. "The Anglican church would not come into existence until over three centuries after these decrees. What's more, the synod was a 'local' response to the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215, which provided papal guidelines for Jewish-Christian relations. In short, the dominant Protestant voice in the UK is now apologising for pre-Reformation Catholic initiatives."

In fact, as Kushner also points out, the groundwork for this year's apology had already been partly laid in 2019, when the Church of England published a document on Christian-Jewish relations, accepting the role of 'Christian anti-Judaism' in both historic and contemporary antisemitism.



Painting at Westminster Abbey of King Edward I.

The decision to apologise now for laws made in England in the Middle Ages marks ‘a formal break with historic prejudices’ in the words of Jacob Vince, a lay synod member from Chichester, who was one of those proposing the move. The apology also reflects growing recognition that modern antisemitism is on the rise across Europe and in the UK.

England was the first country to impose the wearing of a distinctive badge, and the first country to expel its entire Jewish population. The blood libel, which has been the pretext for the murder of thousands of innocent Jews over the centuries, was also a medieval English invention.

If this apology helps to raise awareness of England’s centrality and complicity in this longest and most lethal form of xenophobia, it can only be a good thing. If it helps to communicate that antisemitism should be of concern not only for Jews but for everyone in a society that wants to call itself civilised, it is a vital step forward and very much a case of better late than never.

Rebecca Abrams is the author of *The Jewish Journey: 4000 Years in 22 Objects* and co-editor of *Jewish Treasures of Oxford Libraries*. Her new book *Licoricia: The Rise and Fall of a Jewish Medieval Businesswoman* will be published in July 2022.

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